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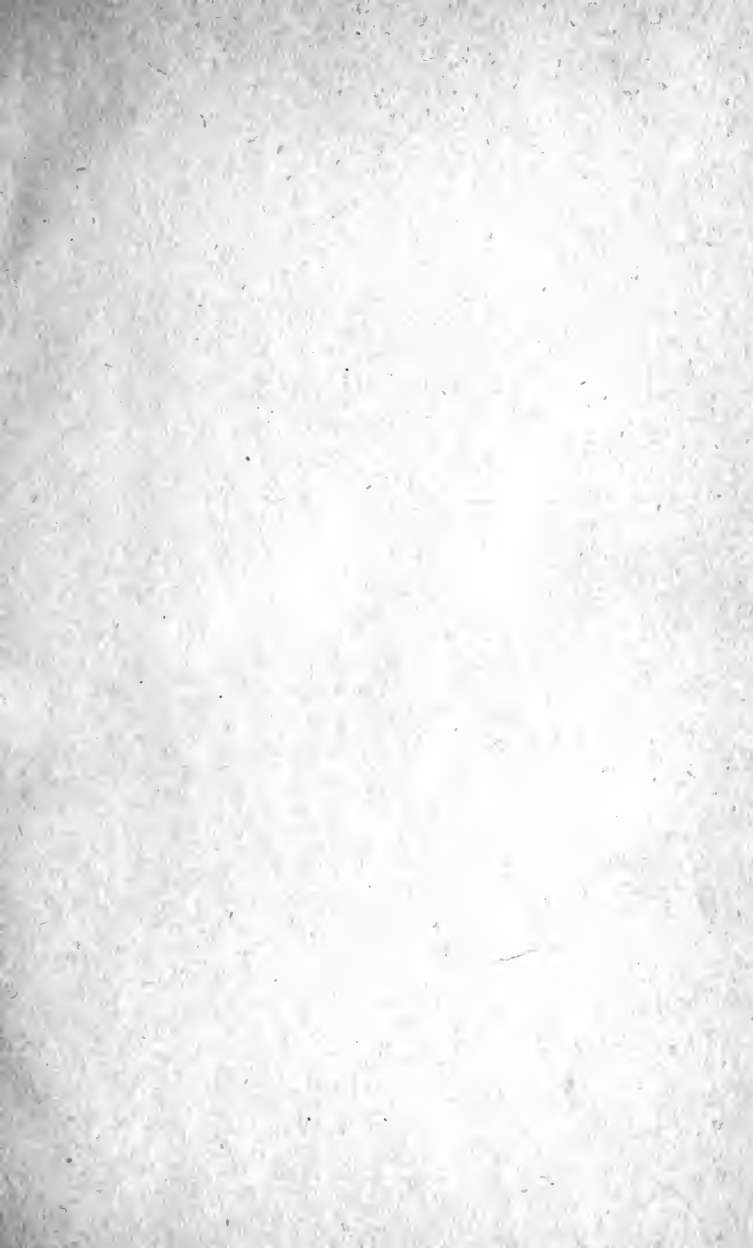
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J O H N

A LOVE STORY

BY

MRS OLIPHANT

AUTHOR OF 'CHRONICLES OF CARLINGFORD,' ETC.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS
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J O H N.



CHAPTER I.

I do not know how to begin this story otherwise than by a confession that I cannot describe its very first scene. It was a scene such as happens very often in romance, and which a great many writers could describe to the life. I know who could do it so well that you would think you saw the accident—the plunge of the frightened horse, the sudden change in the sensations of the rider from voluntary progress on her own part to a gradual confused wild mad rush past of trees and houses and hedgerows, and all the whirling level green of the country round—the flash before her eyes—the jar—the stillness of insensibility. Many

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writers whom I know could make a great point of it ; but I never was run away with by my horse, and I do not know how it feels. Therefore I will begin where the excitement ends, and take up my story from the moment when Kate Crediton opened her eyes, without any notion where she was, with a thousand bells ringing in her ears, and awful shadows of something that had happened or was going to happen flitting about her brain—and by degrees found that she was not on her horse, as she had been when last she had any acquaintance with herself, but lying on a sofa with a sense of wetness and coolness about her head, and the strangest incapacity to move or speak or exercise any energy of her own. She began to hear the voices and to feel the things that were being done to her before she was capable of opening her eyes, or indeed had come to herself. There was a soft splash of water, and sensation as if a sudden shower had come over her face, and then consciousness struggled back, and she began to divine what it was.

“Where am I?” she said, faintly, in her great wonder ; and then her father came for-

ward, and with tears in his eyes implored her not to stir or speak. And there was another man who was dimly apparent to her, holding her hand or her pulse or something; and at her feet a pair of anxious, astonished eyes gazing at her, and somebody behind who was sprinkling something fragrant over her head, and shedding the heavy hair off her forehead. She had fainted, and yet somehow had escaped being dead, as she ought to have been. Or was she dead, and were these phantoms that were round her, moving so ghostly, speaking with their voices miles off through the plaintive air? But she could not put the question, though she was so curious. She could not move, though she was the most active, restless little creature possible. All the bells of all the country round were booming dully in her ears; or was it rather a hive of bees that had clustered round her with dull, small, murmurous trumpeting? The mist went and came across her eyes like clouds on the sky, and every time it blew aside there was visible that pair of eyes. Whom did they belong to? or were they only floating there in space, with

perhaps a pair of wings attached?—a hypothesis not inconsistent with Kate's sense that after all she might have died, for anything she could say to the contrary. But the eyes were anxious, puckered up at the corners, with a very intent, disturbed, eager look in them, such as eyes could scarcely have in heaven.

"She will do now," Kate heard some one say beside her; "let her be kept quite quiet, and not allowed to speak—and you may continue the cold compress on the head. I think it will be best to leave her quite alone with Mrs Mitford. Quiet is of the first consequence. I shall come back again in an hour and see how she is."

"But, doctor," said the anxious voice of Mr Crediton, "you don't think——"

"My dear sir, there is no use in thinking anything just now. I hope she will be all right again this evening; but pray come with me, and leave her quiet. At present we can do no good."

I do not mean to say that this connected conversation penetrated to the poor little brain which had just received such a shock; but she

heard it, and caught the name, Mrs Mitford, out of the mist, and her mind began vaguely to revolve round the new idea so oddly thrown into it. Mrs Mitford?—who was she? The name seemed to get into the murmurs of the bees somehow, and buzz and buzz about her. The big eyes disappeared; the sense of other moving living creatures about her died off into the general hum. But for that, everything now was still, except just one rustle behind her at her head. And sometimes a hand came out of the stillness, and dropped new freshness on her forehead; and once it lingered with a soft half caress, and shed back the hair once more, and there came to her the soft coo of a voice as the buzzing became less loud. Yes; the bees began to hum away to their hives, farther and farther off into the slumberous distance. And this?—was it the wood-pigeons among the bees?

Thus it will be seen that poor Kate had received a considerable shock; but yet, as she was young, and had unfathomable fountains of life and energy to draw from, she had quite come to herself by the evening, as the doctor

hoped. Her father was allowed to come in for ten minutes to see her, and almost wept over his child, though that was not by any means his usual frame of mind; and Mrs Mitford emerged from the darkness at the end of the sofa and sat by the side of her charge, and even talked to her sometimes in that voice which was like the wood-pigeon's coo. But who was she? and whose were those two eyes which had floated in the curious cloudy darkness? Perhaps it was because of the general state of confusion in which she found herself that Kate's mind was so occupied with those eyes, thinking whom they could belong to, and who Mrs Mitford could be, who was taking charge of her so simply, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. As the evening darkened, an uncomfortable sense that she ought to get up and get ready to go home came over her. And she did not want to go home. To lie there quite still, full of dreamy wonderings, which were half pleasant, half confusing, seemed all she was fit for. The very idea of raising herself, of putting her foot on the ground,

seemed to bring back all those buzzing bees—and yet night was coming on, and that of course would be the necessary thing to do.

It was almost dark when, for the second time, her father came to the side of her sofa. He came very softly, and hushed her when she first attempted to speak. “Not a word, my darling,” he said—“not a word; you must not talk.”

“But I must,” said Kate, though even her own voice sounded at least five miles off. “Papa, must not I get up and go home?”

“You are not able,” he said, stooping over and kissing her. “Don’t trouble yourself about that. Mrs Mitford has promised to take charge of you till you are better. You must lie quite quiet, and not think of anything till you get well.”

“I am—pretty well,” said Kate, “and who is Mrs——?” She stopped, for there was a shadow behind Mr Crediton, who could only be Mrs Mitford herself, and Kate’s sense of courtesy was not gone, though she was so strangely confused. Then she gave a little exclamation of surprise. “I am still in my

habit," she said, with vague wonder, "though it is almost night!"

"We are going to get you out of your habit presently, my dear," said Mrs Mitford. "Say good-night to your father, for we must send him away. You will soon know who I am, and all about it; but you must not talk to-night."

And then, before she knew how, she was released from her warm clinging dress, and laid, all white and fresh and cool, in a cool, soft, shaded bed, where the confusion gradually deepened round her. Kate could have vowed she had never slept at all, but had been all the while sensible of the strangeness and stillness of the place—of now and then a sound and touch that felt like the embodiment of the silence—of a faint glimmer of light in the darkness — of sometimes a wandering breath of air, as if the window had been opened; and the sense of some one by her all the while. But yet, no doubt, she must have slept; for it became apparent to her all at once that day had returned—that the morning air was coming in, and the whole dim chamber was flooded through and through with

light,—light which was not sunshine, and yet looked like the essence of sunshine. She seemed to herself to look up all at once out of the soft darkness which had prevented her from identifying anything, to see this daylight room all bright and clear, with its pictures and its furniture, and a bright-faced soft-eyed woman who stood by her bed-side, no longer a shadow among the shadows. Such soft eyes, though they were no longer young, a complexion so softly, sweetly tinted, a look that caressed every young creature it rested upon:—If this was Mrs Mitford, it was very pleasant to be left in her charge. She had a little tray in her hands, white-covered, with fragrant tea and delicate bits of dry toast. Kate, not knowing how it was that she had woke so suddenly to this pleasant spectacle, tried to start up, with her usual impetuosity, but fell back again immediately, with her head all buzzing and confused, as it had been on the previous night.

“Oh dear! what is the matter with me?” cried Kate, so much overwhelmed by her sensations that she forgot civility.

"Nothing very much, I hope, my dear," said Mrs Mitford; "but you are not well enough to jump up like that. You had a bad fall yesterday; but you have slept so well all night——"

"Oh no—I think not," protested Kate; and then it suddenly occurred to her how ungrateful she was. "I am sure you were sitting up with me," she said. "It is so very good of you; and I don't even know—my head is so strange."

"You shall hear all about it in time," said her cheerful nurse. "You have only to keep quiet, that is all, and take some tea, and be content to be an invalid. Is that hard? But it might have been so much worse; and oh! we have such reason to be thankful, my dear!"

Kate did not say anything, but she gazed so, throwing all her awe-stricken thoughts into her eyes, that the kind woman answered the thought as if it had been spoken.

"Yes, you might have been killed—and my John too. Thank God, you are both safe! But you must not ask any more questions.

You must let me settle your pillows for you, and try to take some tea."

"My John!" who was that? another mysterious new being in this world of darkness. Kate gazed imploringly at her new friend, whom she had identified and made out. But Mrs Mitford's attention was fixed on the pillows, which she piled up cunningly behind the patient to support her. "Is that comfortable?" she asked. "It does not make you giddy to sit up like that? and here is your breakfast, and a rose with the dew on it from my—from the garden," she added, after a little momentary pause. Kate's mind was very much confused, it is true, but still her woman's wit had not so much deserted her but that she could make out that broken sentence. It was "my John," no doubt, that her friend had been about to say, and why then could not she say it without hesitation? An involuntary smile stole over Kate's face; she put up the rose to hide this smile, taking in all its freshness and dewiness and perfume into her young being. Evidently John was not without discrimination—and Kate, we are

obliged to confess, was the kind of girl to like the rose all the better coming to her in this half-mysterious way, than if Mrs Mitford had but gathered it in the garden as she took her morning walk.

“It is very sweet; and it is so kind of—you, to bring it me,” said Kate, with a little gleam of habitual mischief waking in her pretty eyes. “But oh! my head feels so strange, I can’t make it out.”

“Perhaps you had better not talk any more, but lie down again as soon as you have had your tea,” said Mrs Mitford; and she only smiled upon Kate’s further attempts to enter into conversation, and shook her head. When the little tray had been removed, and the pillows lowered, Kate was left with her rose, in a not unwilling quiet. After all, curious though she was, she did not feel able to talk: her head still felt, as she said, very strange. The bees were not so far off but what they were ready to come back when she stirred. On the whole, it was best to lie back and keep quite still, and watch her nurse moving about the room. She had a grey alpaca gown,

which shone with pretty *reflets* like silk, but did not rustle to vex the invalid's nerves; and a little white cap that set off her soft rose-tints. Kate lay and wondered how she had managed to keep that lovely soft complexion—and then why she wore a cap, which so few people do nowadays. Certainly Mrs Mitford had no need to wear it; she had plenty of hair, though it was beginning to be touched by grey, and Kate was sufficiently a young woman of her time to know that no hair now needs to grow grey unless its owner chooses. And then she wondered how old Mrs Mitford was. She might not have been any more than forty, and yet she might be ten years older than that—it was hard to say. She went about softly, not quite noiselessly, which is as hurtful to the nerves as boisterousness, but with just sound enough to make you aware she was there. And it was so *nice*, Kate thought, to have her there. Her pretty rose ribbons, which brightened the grey dress, were not so pretty as the softer roses on her cheeks. Kate was all lilies and roses herself, and she could not but gaze with a sympathetic

admiration at the woman so much older than herself, who still retained this special loveliness. She looked like Methuselah to Kate, and yet she was so pretty. "Shall I be as pretty, I wonder, when I am as old?" the girl asked herself; and once more was surprised by a smile at the quaint, strange, incomprehensible thought. Kate Crediton fifty, but still possessed of a pretty complexion, and considered a nice-looking woman of her age! The idea was so odd that into the quietness there bubbled up a little sudden fountain of laughter, of which, as soon as she heard it, Kate was so infinitely ashamed, that even her rose did not suffice to hide the colour which blazed up into her cheeks.

"Laughing, my dear!" said Mrs Mitford, though not without a little anxiety, drawing near the bed. "What has amused you?" And she came quite close, and touched Kate's forehead softly with her hand, and gazed at her, with just a touch of dread lest her mind was wandering, which the girl guessed somehow, and which instantly sobered her thoughts.

"I was thinking how funny it is to be lying

here so comfortable, and you taking care of me as if I belonged to you, and not to know where I am, nor—anything about it. It is all so queer.”

“It is not half so queer as you think,” said Mrs Mitford, smiling; “you will find it is quite natural when you are a little better. But we must not talk till the doctor comes. He gave orders you were to be kept perfectly quiet. Perhaps he will relax when he sees how well you are, if you keep quite quiet now.”

“When will he come!” said Kate, with a sigh of impatience; and then in her hasty way she put up her face, as well as she was able, to her kind nurse. “I wonder if mamma was like you,” cried the motherless creature, with a few tears which came as suddenly as the laughter. It was Kate’s way; but Mrs Mitford did not know that, and was wonderfully touched, and kissed her, and bathed her face, and smoothed her hair, and did a hundred little tender offices for her, making her “nice,” as an invalid should look.

“My hair was much the same colour when

I was your age, and I had just such heaps of it," the kind woman said, combing out and caressing those great shining coils.

"I shall be just the same-looking woman when I am old," was the comment Kate made to herself; and the thought almost made her laugh again. But this time she had warning of the inclination, and restrained herself; and thus the morning wore away.

When the doctor came he pronounced her a great deal better, and Kate lay wondering, and listened with all her ears to the conversation that went on in hushed tones near her bedside. "Not light-headed at all?" said the doctor; "not talking nonsense?" "And oh," cried Kate to herself, "if I did not talk nonsense, it is the first time in all my life!" "Oh no, she has been quite rational—quite herself," said Mrs Mitford; and Kate, exercising intense self-control, did not laugh. If she had ever been called rational before, it would not have been so hard; and how little they must know about her! "It is rather nice to be considered sensible," she said within herself; but she could not suppress the laughing mis-

chief in her eye, which the doctor perceived when he turned round to feel her pulse again.

"She looks as if she were laughing at us all," he said. "Miss Crediton, tell me do you feel quite well? able to get up this moment and ride home?"

"I am very well when I lie still," said Kate; "but I don't want to go home, please. *She* is not at home; I am obliged to call her *she*, which is very uncivil, because nobody will tell me her name."

"I can do that much for you," said the doctor. "This is Mrs Mitford of Fanshawe Regis; and I can tell you you were in luck to be run away with close to her door."

"You don't need to tell me that," said Kate. "Please, Mrs Mitford, will you kiss me, now we are introduced? I am Kate Crediton—perhaps you know; and I am sure I don't know why I did not talk nonsense all last night, for they say I always do at home."

"But you must not here," said the doctor, who was an old man, and smiled at her kindly,—"nor chatter at all, indeed, for several days. See how it brings the blood to her face! If

you will be very good you may see your father, and ask—let me see—six questions ; but not one word more.”

“Is papa still here ?” cried Kate.

“That is one,” said the doctor ; “be careful, or you will come to the end of your list, as the man in the fairy tale came to the end of his wishes. He is waiting to come in.”

“Have I only five left ?” said Kate. “Please, let him come in. I shall ask him how it all happened ; and then I shall ask him where we are—that is three ; and when he is going home ; and what is the matter with me that I must lie here—and then——” She had been counting on her fingers, and paused with the forefinger of one hand resting on the little finger of the other. Mrs Mitford had gone to the door to admit Mr Crediton, and Kate was alone with the old doctor, who looked at her so kindly. She laid back her head among the pillows, a little flushed by talking ; her pretty hair, which Mrs Mitford had just smoothed, had begun to ruffle up again in light little puffs of curls. She lay back, looking up at the doctor like a certain Greuze I know

of, with fingers like bits of creamy pink shells, half transparent, doing their bit of calculation. "And then," she added, with a long-drawn breath, half of mischief, half of fatigue, "I will ask him who is 'my John'?"

"Has she been talking to you about my John?" said the doctor, amused; and Kate gave a little nod of her pretty head at him, where she lay back like a rosebud upon the pillows. It was too late to answer in words, for Mrs Mitford was coming back from the door, followed by Mr Crediton, who looked excited and anxious, and had something like a tear in the corner of his eyes.

"Well, my pet, so you are better!" he said. "That is right, Kate. I have had a most miserable night, doctor, thinking of her. But now I hear it's going to be all right. It is not, of course, for any special virtue in her," he said, turning round to them with a strained little laugh when he had kissed her, "but one has all sorts of prejudices about one's only child."

"Yes, indeed. I know very well what it is to have an only child," said Mrs Mitford.

“You could not find more sympathy anywhere in that particular. When there is anything the matter with my boy, the whole world is turned upside down.”

Kate looked at the doctor with an inquiring glance, and he gave her a little confidential nod. The eyes of the young girl and the old man laughed and communicated while the two foolish parents were making their mutual confessions. “Is that my John she is speaking of?” asked Kate’s eyes; and the doctor replied merrily, delighted with his observing patient. To be sure there had been a grave enough moment on the previous day, when these two lives first crossed each other; but this was how the idea of him was formally introduced to Kate Crediton’s mind. It was a foolish, flighty, light, little mind, thinking of nothing but fun and nonsense. Yet even now it did cross the doctor’s mind, with a momentary compunction, that the business might turn out serious enough for poor John.

CHAPTER II.

It was nearly a week before Kate was permitted to leave her bed, and during that time she had learned a great deal about the economy of Fanshawe Regis. She lay among the pillows every day a little higher, with her natural colour coming back, looking more and more like the Greuze, and listened to all the domestic revelations that flowed from Mrs Mitford's lips. The kind woman was pleased with so lively a listener, and thus there gradually unrolled itself before Kate a moving panorama of another existence, which the girl, perhaps, had not sufficient imagination or sympathy to enter fully into, but which interested her much in bits, and amused her, and to which she lent a very willing ear. Sometimes the door of the room would be opened, and Kate would hear

the footsteps in the house of which she was now a recognised inmate, but which she knew nothing of. There was one solemn step that creaked and went slowly, gravely, up and down stairs, as if life were a weighty ceremonial to be accomplished very seriously, which was evidently the step of Dr Mitford, the Rector of Fanshawe Regis, and rural dean; and there was a lighter springy masculine foot, which came to the very door sometimes with flowers and letters and books for the invalid, and which Kate did not need to be told was "my John." In the languor of her illness, and in the absence of other objects of interest, this step became quite important to Kate. She was not, we are obliged to confess, by any means a very good young woman. She was a spoiled child, and she had been born a flirt, which could scarcely be said to be her fault. From three years old to nineteen, which was her present age, it had been the occupation of her existence to prey upon mankind. Whether it was sugar-plums she played for or hearts had not mattered very much to her. She had put forth her wiles, her smiles, her thousand little

fascinations, with a spontaneous, almost unconscious, instinct. It was necessary to her to be pleasing somebody—to be first in some one's regard, whoever that some one might be. Before she had been half a day under Mrs Mitford's care, that good soul was her slave; and when that innocent little bit of captivation was complete, and when the doctor, too, showed symptoms of having put on her chains, Kate felt her hands free, and longed for the hunting-grounds and the excitement of the sport. John was the most likely victim, and yet she could not get at him, being chained up here out of reach. It filled her invalid existence with a little touch of excitement. She sent him pretty messages in return for his roses, and listened to all his mother's stories of him. Not that John in himself interested the girl. He was her natural victim, that was all, and she smiled with a vague satisfaction at thought of the mischief which she knew she could do.

The life she lived in her room in this strange house of which she knew nothing, yet with which she was so familiar, was the strangest amusing episode to Kate. After the first two.

days Mrs Mitford kept by her less closely, and a fresh country housemaid, full of wonder and sympathy and admiration for the pretty young lady, came into the room as soon as she was awake to put it in order for the day. Lizzie had a round fresh apple-blossom face which pleased Kate's eye, and was full of that wondering worship for the creature so like herself in age and nature, so infinitely above her in other matters, possessed of so many incomprehensible fascinations and refinements, which one young woman so often entertains for another. There had been great calculations in the kitchen about Kate's probable age and her beauty, the colour of her hair, the shape of her hat, her father's wealth, and everything about her. The cook at Fanshawe Regis came from Camelford, where Mr Crediton lived, and knew that his bank was the Bank of England to all the country round, and that he was rolling in money, and spared nothing on his only child. Lizzie had listened with open eyes to all the details her fellow-servant knew, or could recollect or invent, of the fairy existence of this wonderful young

lady. About twenty, cook concluded Miss Crediton was—and Lizzie was just over twenty. And she too had blue eyes like Kate, and apple-blossom cheeks, and was about the same height—but yet what a difference! “You’ve seen Miss Parsons as was her maid—a stuck-up thing with her fine bonnets; her mother keeps a millinery shop down Thistle-field way, leading out o’ Camel-ford,” said cook. “She was lady’s-maid to this Miss Crediton, and a fine thing for her too. She might take a fancy to you, Liz, if you were to flatter her a bit.” “Laws, I never dare open my lips,” said Lizzie; “she’ll lie there a-noticing everything with them eyes, as looks you through and through. Them as is no skolards has no chance.” But Lizzie’s heart beat as the morning came, and she went softly into Miss Crediton’s room, and set the windows open, and dusted and settled and put everything to rights. Kate watched her, saying nothing at first, not without a little natural interest on her side in the young woman of her own age, in all the roundness, and softness, and whiteness, and rosiness of

youth. She saw the girl's awe-stricken looks at herself, and was amused, and even a little flattered, by Lizzie's admiration,—and being weary of silence, began to draw her out. It was chiefly from Lizzie's account that Kate identified all the movements of the house, and found out the hours at which Mrs Mitford visited the schools, and when she went to see her poor people. "When she leaves you, miss, to have a little rest after your dinner, it's time for the school," said Lizzie. "Missis never misses a day, not so long as I can remember, except now and again, when Mr John's been ill."

"Is Mr John often ill?" said Kate.

"Oh no, miss; never, so to speak; but missis makes an idol of him. Mother thinks as she makes too much an idol on him. He's her only son, like—it aint like having nine or ten, as most folks have," said Lizzie, apologetically, as she arranged the little table by Kate's bedside, where there was, as usual, a bouquet of John's roses, freshly gathered.

"That is true," said Kate, with a laugh which Lizzie could not understand.

“But I’d rather have one like Mr John, than a dozen like most folks,” Lizzie added, with energy ; “most of ’em in the village is nought but trouble to them they belongs to. It’s hard to tell of ’em what they’re made for, them big lads. One’ll go poaching and idling, till ye don’t know what to do with ’um ; and another ’ll list, and break his folks’s hearts. Mother says they’re a cross, but I think as they’re worse than a cross—drinking, and fighting, and quarrelling, and never good for nought. And them as is steady goes away, and you don’t get no good o’ them. You may laugh, miss, as don’t know no better—but there are folks as can’t laugh.”

“I did not laugh, Lizzie,” said Kate. “I am very sorry—but why are you so serious about it ? I hope the girls are better than the lads.”

“Mother says we’ve haven’t got the same temptations,” said Lizzie, dubiously ; “but she’s old, you know, miss, and I dare to say she don’t think on. I’ve got four brothers, all idler the one nor the other. And if I don’t know, I don’ know who should. Mother she’s

a good woman, and I hope we'll all pass for her sake—but missis, she never hears a cross word from Mr John."

"A cross word, indeed!" said Kate; "that would be unpardonable—and she such a darling. He ought to be proud of having a mother like that. I am very fond of her myself."

"He's as proud as Punch, miss," said Lizzie, "and missis she's proud of him. When he's at home he's always by to walk wi' her and talk with her. Master, he's that learned ye never know what to make of him. They say as he's the biggest scholard in all Huntingshire. It aint to be expected as he would just take his little walks, and make it pleasant like a common man."

"And what does Mrs Mitford do when Mr John is away?" said Kate, a little doubtful of the propriety of asking so many questions, but too curious to let the opportunity slip.

"Oh, miss! it's dreadful, that is," cried Lizzie. "It's enough to make you cry just to look at her face. Some days she'll go across to the school as many as three times—and

down to the village among all the poor folks. Mother aint Church like me, miss," the girl continued, with a little apologetic curtsy; "she was born like in Zion, she says, and she can't make up her mind not to leave it; and it aint to be expected as poor missis should be fond of Zion folks. But when any of the lads are in trouble she never minds church nor chapel. Mother says she's a bit proud as her own lad is one as never gets into no trouble—and the like of him haven't got the same temptations, mother says. But I always say as it's kind of missis, all the same."

"I should think so, indeed," cried Kate, "and I think your mother must be——" she was going to say a disagreeable old woman, but stopped in time—"rather hard upon other people," she went on, diplomatically; "but then if Mr John goes away altogether, I am afraid Mrs Mitford will break her heart."

"Oh, miss, don't you be afeared," cried Lizzie, with bright confidence—"he aint going away. It sounds funny, but he's going to be the new curate, is Mr John."

"Oh!!" Kate gave a little cry of disap-

pointment and dismay. "Is he a clergyman? I never thought of that."

"Not yet, miss," said Lizzie, "but they say as he's going up to the bishop at Michaelmas or thereabouts, and then we'll have him here for curate, and missis will be as glad as glad."

"I am sure I am not glad," said Kate to herself, pouting over this unlooked-for piece of news. Not that she cared for John. She had never seen him, how could she care? He had saved her life, people said, but then that was the most fantastic beginning of an acquaintance, like a thing in a novel, and she would rather have seen no more of him ever after, had that been all. But Kate had become interested in my John by dint of hearing his step, and receiving his roses, and knowing him to be her natural victim. And that he should be a clergyman spoilt all. Curates, of course, are always fair game—but then an effective young sportswoman like Kate Crediton can bag curates with so little trouble. Facility, let us say, after the fashion of the copybooks, breeds contempt. And, on the other hand, light-minded as she was, she felt that a *clergyman*,

as distinct from a curate, was a thing that called for respect—and felt herself suddenly pulled up and brought to a pause in all her projects for amusement. How provoking it was ! if he had been going to be a soldier, or a barrister, or an—anything except a clergyman ! She could not, for Mrs Mitford's sake, treat him on the ground of simple curatedom ; nor would she beguile him from his serious intentions, and wound his mother, who had been so good to her. A clergyman ! a being either ready to fall a too ready victim, or a martyr, whom to interfere with would be sacrilege. Kate was thoroughly *contrariée*. She felt that fortune was against her, and that this was a climax to the misfortunes which hitherto had sat so very lightly upon her. To be thrown from her horse and half-killed—to find herself an inmate of a strange house which she had never heard of before—to be introduced into a new world altogether, with the most delicious sense of novelty and strangeness—and all to find herself at last face to face with a clergyman ! Kate could not understand what could be meant by such a waste of

means for so miserable an end. "I might have been killed," she said to herself, "and he only a clergyman all the time!" She was, in short, disgusted at once with her ill fortune and her foolish dreams. She talked no more to Lizzie, but fell back on her pillows, and pushed the roses away with her hand. Mrs Mitford had deceived her, John had deceived her. To think she should really have been getting up a little romance on the subject, and he to turn out only a clergyman after all! When John's mother returned to the room, after giving him a full account of her patient, along with his breakfast, and reanimating by her son's interest her own warm glow of sympathy for the invalid, she was quite disturbed by the pucker on Kate's brow. "Dear me! I am afraid you have been doing too much," she said, anxiously, bending over the bed. "I have a little headache, that is all," said Kate, whose temper was affected. And Mrs Mitford shook her head, and took immediate action. She had the blinds all drawn down again which Lizzie had drawn up, and sprinkled eau-de-Cologne all over Kate, and

laid aside her own work, which required light, and with her knitting in her hand instead, placed herself in the shade, and said "hush" to every word her patient addressed to her. "Quiet and darkness," she said, softly; "hush, my dear—there is nothing like darkness and quiet—I always find them effectual." Poor Kate had to make the best of it. Instead of going on with her new novel, and chattering to her heart's content, she had to lie silent and shut her eyes, and be content with the eau-de-Cologne; which, after all, though he was but a clergyman, was less interesting than John.

It was a great event to Kate, and also to the kitchen at Fanshawe Regis, when "Miss Parsons" came from Camelford with her young mistress's "things." Kate had never been ill in her life before, and she had not been very ill or suffering much even now, so that the feeling of state and dignity and superiority to the rest of the world was unmingled by any severe reminiscence of pain. It gave her quite a thrill of pleasure to see her pretty dresses again. She had been allowed to get

up to lie on the sofa by the window, and look out at the roses, but only in her dressing-gown, which was very pretty, no doubt, and very cool, but not so pleasant as all those fresh summer costumes with their floating ribbons. She lay on her sofa, and watched Parsons unpack them with lively interest. "But I should like to know what you mean me to do with them all," she said. "Here are enough for all the summer; and how long do you suppose I am going to stay? Perhaps a week—there are a dozen gowns at least."

"I did not know which you would like, miss," said Parsons; "nor if you might be tempted to stay. It's so pretty all about, and they're all so fond of you——"

"Fond of me!" said Kate, with a sudden blush, which surprised herself intensely. "You goose! nobody has seen me but Mrs Mitford—and she will be very glad to get rid of so much trouble, I should think."

"Ah, miss! as if some folks didn't know better than that," said Parsons; which confounded Kate so that she made no answer, but paused to reflect whether the girl was mad, or

if she could mean anything. John had seen her, it was true, though she had not seen him. He had saved her life; he had kept sending her roses all the time. And, no doubt, it is quite possible that a man (poor creature!) might be *struck* at first sight, and never get the better of it all his life after. The suggestion made her smile for one moment, and then filled her with a certain contempt for John.

"Please finish your unpacking as soon as you can," she said, with severe politeness, to Parsons. "Take out half—that will do. I stay here a week only. And make haste, please, for I am tired of all this fuss."

"Now they've come," said Parsons, doggedly, "they'd best be unpacked; and if you was to change your mind——"

"Be quiet, please, and get done and go away," cried Kate. "You will make me ill again, if you don't mind."

And then, considerably ruffled and put out, she turned her head to the window. Mrs Mitford had scrupulously kept "the gentlemen"—her husband and her son---out of the flower-garden, on which Kate's windows looked.

She did not think a young lady in a dressing-gown a fit spectacle for any eyes but her own ; but Kate was almost well, and her hostess had relaxed a little. As she looked out now she saw through the venetian blinds two figures in the distance walking slowly along a sheltered walk. It could only be John whom his mother was leading on in that way. Her head was almost resting against his arm as she looked up and talked to him. She leant upon him with that pleasant sense of support and help which makes weakness sweet ; there was even in her attitude a something which Kate perceived dimly by instinct, but could not have put in words ; that delicious sense of surprise, and secret, sacred, humorous consciousness of the wonder there was in it—the sweet jest of being thus supported by her baby, her child, he whom she had carried in her arms—was it yesterday ?—which a man's mother enjoys privately all to herself. Somehow a little envy stole over Kate as she looked at them. She was very fond of her father ; but yet it was not such happiness to be with him as it was for this other woman to be with her boy. The young

creature thirsting for everything that was sweetest in life would have liked to have that too. To be sure she could not be John's mother, or anybody's mother, and would have laughed with inextinguishable laughter at herself for the thought, had she realised it. But still she envied Mrs Mitford, feeling that kind woman to have thus appropriated a joy beyond her reach—and what do women want with joys at that age? Should not all be concentrated in one sweetest draught for the rose lips, so dewy and soft with youth? Kate would have repudiated such a sentiment, of course; and yet this was what breathed unconsciously in her heart. She went to bed with a little spiteful feeling against Mrs Mitford. Had not she made a clergyman of her boy on purpose to spite Kate? If he had been a gravedigger his mother would loved him just the same; it would have made no difference to her. If he had been ugly, and weakly, and half his size, his mother would have liked him quite as well; which were all so many offences against Kate, and evidences of her inferiority. She wanted to have her own delights and the other

woman's delights too. She wanted to be young and to be old ; to have a lover's adoration and a son's worship, and every other variety that love can take. It so spited her that she cried when she went to bed, and then burst out laughing at her own folly, and was as silly as you can conceive it possible to be—perhaps more silly than after nineteen any one could conceive.

Next day, after Lizzie had put the room in order, and Mrs Mitford had paid her after-breakfast visit, and gone off to the village to see some of her poor people, it occurred to Kate to try her own strength. Her father was coming to dinner at the Rectory that day, and it had been arranged that she was to be up in the evening to see him. But when all was quiet in the house, Mrs Mitford out, the doctor not expected, and Parsons at hand, who was not likely to thwart her mistress, Kate formed a different plan for herself. She had her dresses taken out, just to look at them. After being in a dressing-gown for a week, the charms of a real *dress*, something that fits, is wonderful. Kate gave a contemptuous glance

at her white wrapper, as she gazed at all those pretty garments, and then she glanced at herself in the glass opposite, with her hair all loosely bundled up under her net. What a guy she looked, lying there so long, as if she had had a fever! "A good thing they did not bethink themselves of cutting off my hair," she said, under her breath; and could not but ask herself with horror whether all the eau-de-Cologne that had been lavished on her head, and all the showers of water, would affect her hair disadvantageously. She might as well take it out of the net at least, and let Parsons dress it. When this was done, Kate felt her courage rise. She sprang up from her sofa, frightening the maid. "I am going to dress—I must dress—I can't bear this thing five minutes longer!" she cried.

"Oh, miss! you'll catch your death," cried Parsons, not indeed knowing why, but delivering the first missile of offence that came to her hand. But Parsons was far from being a person of spirit, or able to cope with her young mistress. She stood helplessly by, protesting, but making no effort to resist, except the pas-

sive one of giving no assistance. Kate flew at her dress with a sense of novelty which gave it an additional charm. She buttoned herself into it with a certain delight. "Oh, how nice it is to feel one has something on!" she cried, tossing her wrapper to the other side of the room; and she fastened her belt, and tied her ribbons, and did everything for herself with a sweep of enthusiasm. The reader has only seen her as an invalid, and Kate was very well worth looking at. She was a little over the middle height; her figure was very slender and pliant and graceful—upright, yet bending as if with every breeze. Her hair was warm sunny brown hair; her eyes were dark-violet blue, large, and limpid, and full of a startled sweetness, like the eyes of a fawn. They had the child's look of surprise at the fair world and wonderful beings among which it finds itself, which has always so great a charm; and with that blue ribbon in her pretty hair, and the clear blue muslin dress, she was like a flower. And then she had that glory of complexion which we are so fond of claiming as specially English. Nothing could be more

delicate or more lovely than the gradations of colour in her face—her lips a rich rose, her cheeks a little paler—a soft rose-reflection upon her delicate features and white throat. It was not “the perfect woman nobly planned” which came to your mind at sight of so pretty a creature. She was a Greuze—an article of luxury, worth quantities of money, and always delightful to look at—an ornament to any chamber, the stateliest or the simplest. She might have been placed in a palace or in a cottage, and would not have looked out of place in either ; and there was enough beauty in her to decorate the place at once, and make up for all lack of colour or loveliness besides. But what she might have beyond the qualities of the Greuze the spectator could not tell. What harm or good she might have it in her to do—what might be the result even of this first unexpected appearance of hers in the house which she had taken by storm—it was impossible to predict. It could not but be either for good or evil ; but, looking into the lovely, flower-like face, into her surprised sweet eyes, the most keen observer would have

been baffled. She was full of childish delight in the novelty — a half-mischievous, half-innocent pleasure in the anticipation of producing some effect in the quiet unsuspecting house ; but that was all that could be made out. She stood before the glass for a minute contemplating her perfected toilette with the highest satisfaction. She looked like a wreath of that lovely evanescent convolvulus, which is blue and white and rose all at once. “ Am I nice ? ” she said to the bewildered Parsons ; who replied only by a bewildered exclamation of “ Oh, miss ! ” and then Kate turned, poising herself for one moment on her heel in uncertainty. She took one of John’s roses and placed it in her belt ; and then, with a little wave of her handkerchief, and, as it were, flourish of trumpets, she opened her door and stepped forth into the unknown.

Here let us pause for a moment. To step for the first time into a new country is thrilling to the inexperienced traveller ; but to put your foot into a new house,—a place which is utterly strange to you, and yet which you are free to penetrate through as if it were your

own—to take your chance of stumbling against people whom you know intimately and yet have no acquaintance with—to set out on a voyage of discovery into the most intimate domestic shrines, with no light but that of your own genius to guide you,—is more thrilling still. Kate stepped briskly over the threshold of her own room, and then she paused aghast at her own audacity. The cold silence of the unknown hushed her back as if she had been on an expedition into the arctic regions. She paused, and her heart gave a loud beat. Should she retire into the ascertained and lawful place from which Parsons was watching with a face of consternation, or should she go on? But no! never!—put it in Parson's power to taunt her with a retreat—that could not be! She gave another little wave of her handkerchief, as if it had been her banner, and went on.

But it must be avowed that when she was out of sight of Parsons and her own room, Kate paused again and panted, and clung to the banisters, looking down the broad, handsome staircase. She could see down into the

hall, with all its closed doors, looking so silent, so strange, so suggestive. She did not know what she would find there ; and nobody knew her or expected her. A distant sound from the kitchen, Lizzie's hearty, youthful laugh, struck with a consolatory sound upon her ear. But alas ! she was not bound to the kitchen, where she had friends, but to investigate those closed doors, with such wonders as might be within. She clung to the great polished oak banister for a moment, feeling her heart beat ; and then, " courage ! " cried Kate, and launched herself into the unknown world below stairs.

CHAPTER III.

THE Rectory at Fanshawe Regis was a very good house. Indeed it was the old manor-house of the Fanshawes, which had been thus appropriated at the time when the great castle was built, which had eventually ruined the race. Dr Mitford and his son were both in the library on the morning of Kate's descent. It was the most picturesque room in the house. It was, indeed, a kind of double room, one end of it being smaller than the other, and contracted by two pillars which stood out at a little distance from the walls, and looked almost like a doorway to the larger end, which was the Doctor's especial domain. It was clothed with books from ceiling to floor, and the contraction made by the pillars framed in the apartment behind, giving a certain aspect

of distance to the fine interior. There was a great old-fashioned fireplace at the very end, with a projecting oak canopy, also supported by pillars, and to the right of that a broad, deeply recessed Elizabethan window, throwing a full side light upon the Doctor's writing-table, at which he sat absorbed, with his fine white head shining as in a picture. When Kate opened the door cautiously and looked in at this picture, she was so moved by a sense of her own temerity, and by involuntary, half-childish fright lest she should be scolded or punished for it, that it was at least a minute before she took in the scene before her; and even then she did not take it all in. She never even glanced at the foreground—at the other Elizabethan window, with coloured shields of painted glass obscuring the sunshine, in which sat another reader, who raised his eyes at the sound of the opening door with a surprise which it would be difficult to describe. There were three of them all in the same room, and none was aware of the scrutiny with which each was severally regarded. It was like a scene in a comedy.

Kate peeping frightened at the door, growing a little bolder as she perceived herself unnoticed, gazing at Dr Mitford's white head over his books and papers, and gradually getting to see the fun of it, and calculate on his start of amazement when he should look up and see her. And opposite to her, in the anteroom, John Mitford at his table, with eyes in which a kindred laughter began to gleam, one hand resting upon his open book, arrested in his work, his looks bent upon the pretty spy, who was as unconscious of his presence as his father was of hers. When John stirred in his seat and suddenly directed Kate's attention to him, she gave a little jump and a cry, and turned round and fled in her amazement. She did not even take time to look and recognise him, but flew from the door, letting it swing after her in a sudden panic. She had found the position very amusing when she was peeping at his unsuspecting father—but to be spied upon in her turn! Kate burst away and fled, taking the first passage she saw. "What's that, eh?" cried Dr Mitford. "I'll go and see, sir," said John, dutifully; and

he got up with beautiful promptitude, and followed the runaway. He saw the gleam of her blue dress down the passage, and followed her before she could draw breath. It was the most curious meeting, for two well-bred persons who did not know each other, and yet were already so deeply connected with each other. Kate, all one desperate blush, turned round when she heard his step and faced him, trembling with shame and fear, and a little weakness—for this violent exercise was not quite in accordance with her weak condition. She scorned to run away farther, and clutched at such remnants of dignity as she could muster. “Mr John Mitford, I am sure,” she said, making him a stately little curtsy, and swallowing at once her fright and her laughter as best she could.

“I am so glad to see you down-stairs,” said John. The mirth went out of his face when he saw her embarrassment. “Come into the drawing-room and rest—it is the coolest room in the house,” he added, opening the door. It was very good of him, Kate felt; but she burst into a peal of nervous laughter as soon

as she had got into the shelter of the shaded room; and then had to exert all her strength to keep from tears.

“I am sure I beg your pardon,” she said, “for laughing. I am so ashamed of myself; but it was so nice to be out of my room, and it was so funny to be in a strange house, and there was something so tempting in the closed door——”

“I only wish you had stayed,” said John, who would himself have felt very awkward but for her confusion; “but my mother will be back presently from the village, and then we can show you the house. I am afraid you are tired. Can I get you anything? I am so sorry my mother is out.”

Kate looked at him, recovering herself, while he stammered through these expressions of solicitude. Now she saw him close at hand, he was a new kind of man. Her scrutiny was not demonstrative, and yet it was exhaustive and penetrating. He was not a foeman worthy of her steel. He was one whom it would be but little credit to subjugate, reckoning by his powers of resistance. He would be

an easy, even a willing victim. But it was something else in John which startled the young manslayer. She had seen various specimens of the fashionable young man, such as Providence throws now and then in the way of country girls; and she knew the genus squire, and all that can be produced in the way of professional in such a place as Camel-ford. It was the county town, and twice a-year there were assizes and barristers within reach; and there were county balls and hunt balls, and various other possibilities which brought the world as represented by the county families and their visitors within reach of the banker's daughter. Mr Crediton was not a common banker. He was well connected, to begin with, and he was the Rothschild of the neighbourhood. Even to the large red-brick house in the High Street, to which he had been always faithful, very fine people would now and then condescend to come. And Fernwood, his country "place," was always as full as he liked to make it of autumn guests, so that Kate's knowledge of men was not inconsiderable. But John Mit-

ford did not belong to any of the types she knew. He was not the ordinary university man, with which she was so well acquainted. He was not the budding curate—mellifluous and deferential. He was not handsome, nor graceful, nor so much as self-possessed. He did not look even as if he were endowed with that ordinary chatter of society which gets people over the difficulty of an eccentric introduction. If she talked the usual nonsense to him, Kate felt doubtful whether he would understand her. “But if one wanted anything done for one!——” she said to herself, with more surprise than ever in her pretty ingenuous-looking eyes. His face was not beautiful, was even a little heavy when in repose, and apt to cloud over with embarrassment, and lose all the light it had when driven into self-consciousness; and yet there was something in it she had never identified, never realised, before. All this passed through her mind while poor John was standing very awkwardly before her, begging her to tell him if he could not get her something, and regretting over and over again that his mother

should be out. Goose! Kate thought to herself; and yet felt the influence of that *something*, which was beyond her reckoning, and which she had never made acquaintance with before.

“Oh, never mind,” she said; “I am quite comfortable, now I am here. I don’t want anything, thanks. Never mind me. If you are busy, don’t take the trouble to stay. You know I am at home, though I never was here before.”

“I hope so,” said John, standing before her, not knowing what to do or say. He took it for granted, in his innocence, that she wished him to go away. And he *had* something to do; but yet did not think it quite civil to leave her, and felt that his mother would not like it—and, to tell the truth, did not like it himself.

“Oh, pray don’t wait,” said Kate; “I shall be quite comfortable. There are plenty of books here, and I can go to the garden if I get tired.” Then there was a little pause. John never budged, standing thus in the height of awkwardness before her — wishing

for his mother — wishing for anything to happen to deliver him, and yet feeling a charm in the position, which was very amazing to him. Kate, for her part, began to recover. She forgot the impression which had been made upon her by that unknown something in his face, and gradually came back to herself. She sat on the sofa playing with the picture-books on the table beside it, very demure; with cast-down eyes; and he balancing himself on one foot, not knowing what to make of himself, watching her anxiously for guidance. Kate resisted as long as she could, and then burst into a peal of unsteady laughter, in which John, very much surprised, did not find himself able to share.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” she cried, when she could command her voice, “for being silly. I don’t know, I am sure, why I should laugh, only it is all so funny. I don’t know you in the least, and yet I know you quite well; and I have been living in the house ever so long, and yet go about like a thief, peeping in at the doors. It is all so very odd. I can’t tell what to make of it. And you who

are looking at me so puzzled—you saved my life!” cried Kate, with another burst of laughter. She had never been so ashamed of herself before, but she could not help it. The whole business was so droll. He kept standing, balancing himself in the funniest way, looking down upon her with the strangest incomprehension—and he had saved her life! Though she was ashamed, she could not restrain herself. She laughed till the tears came into her eyes, more and more stimulated thereto by the gravity and astonishment with which he regarded her. As for John, he tried to laugh at first, but finally settled into quiet, and looked at her with an amazed and wondering observation, as if it was a new species that had thus come suddenly under his eyes.

“I am very glad you are so much amused,” he said at last, quite seriously, poor fellow, without the slightest ironical meaning. Was she by any possibility a little fool, giggling like a baby at the gravest matters? or was it some deeper sense in her of the phantasmagoria of life which had called forth this curious outburst of incomprehensible laughter?

Laughter (John reflected in his perplexity—being, as will be perceived, a young intellectualist, and fond of such questions) is one of the most subtle and least comprehensible of things. It may express folly, levity, mere amusement—or it may express that deep sense of the humour which lies at the bottom of most earthly transactions, which is possible only to very rare spirits. Gazing at Kate with his eyes full of romance, he could not tell which it was, but felt it most probable that it was the latter, the depths being more natural to him than the shallows. “I don’t wonder that you laugh,” he added, after a pause, in the grave way which was so quaint to Kate. “It is like a thing that happened in a dream.”

At this strange comment she looked up at him, puzzled in her turn. Did he mean something? or was he laughing as she had been? But there was no laugh on John’s face; and suddenly it occurred to her that the eyes with which he was looking at her were those same eyes which she had seen, as in a vision, at the foot of the sofa, on the day of her accident. They were full of wonder, and anxiety, and

alarm then ; they were only serious and perplexed, and anxious to understand her now : but yet they were the same eyes ; and the whole scene flashed back upon Kate's impatient mind, and changed her mood in a moment. A sudden cloud, almost like that which comes over a child's face when it is about to cry, enveloped her. "Ah!" she cried, suddenly, "I remember you now. I remember your eyes!"

"My eyes!" cried John, growing scarlet with amazement.

"Yes, your eyes. The day it all happened, you know—though I am sure I don't know even now what did happen. When I came to myself, I suppose—the first thing I was conscious of was a pair of eyes looking at me. They had no body to them," said Kate, with a sudden moisture coming into her own—"they looked so anxious, so unhappy, about me. I see now it was you. How awfully good of you to care!"

"Good of me!" said John, feeling this sudden praise steal all over him with a melting weakening softness of delight. "I was

very anxious, and very much alarmed. I think—they thought—you would never come to yourself.”

“Was it so long?” said Kate, with that intense wistful interest which youth feels in itself.

“It was long to us—please don’t speak of it; it felt like an age,” said John, with a shudder. He turned half away from her in the pain of the recollection, and then turned back to find those moist surprised child eyes of hers fixed upon him with an incipient tear in each of them, and a look of—what was it?—tenderness, gratitude, admiration—yes, admiration—from her to him! It took away his breath, and took the strength out of him. He gave a low sort of chuckle of laughter, most *bizarre* expression of his feelings, and dropped into the first chair he could find in such agonies of bashfulness and pleasure as would have better beseeemed a charity boy than a man trained to encounter with the world. “It is very funny, as you say,” he gasped; and then saw how ridiculous his speech was, and put his hands in his pockets, and blushed all over a violent painful red.

“I don’t think it is the least funny,” said Kate, now altogether in a different humour. “I might have been killed, and you might have been killed, your mother told me; and we are both *only* children, and what would *they* have done? I don’t mind so much about us, for we should but have died, and there would have been an end of it; but only think—what would *they* have done?” cried Kate, turning upon him eyes which were full of the suggested woe.

“Ah!” he cried, despising himself, “there you go above me, as is natural. It is like you to think it would not have mattered for yourself—only for those who loved you, and the desolate world it would have left them. It is like you to think of that.”

“How can you tell it is like me,” said Kate, “when you don’t know me? I was thinking of papa, and of your mother, not of anything so fine as a desolate world.”

“You were thinking like a true woman,” said the young man, gazing at her with all the romance of a mother’s only son in his unsophisticated eyes.

This was all very well for the moment, but Kate had dispersed the real impression which she had actually felt by uttering it, and it was too early in their acquaintance to plunge into romance ; so she changed the subject skilfully. "Please don't abuse women," she said. "I know it is the fashion—and most girls rather like to give in to it, and think it is clever to like men's society best. But I am fond of women, though, perhaps, you will think it weak of me. If I had to choose, I should rather have all women than all men—though, of course, one likes a mixture best."

"Abuse women!" cried John; "I should as soon think of blaspheming heaven. It would be blasphemy. They are heaven to our earth—they are——"

"Hush," said Kate, holding up her little white rose-tipped hand with a certain maternal superiority. "Don't be extravagant. When you are in love, you know, it is quite proper to say all that sort of thing to *one* girl; but I don't think it ought to be wasted upon anybody. Please tell me, did your father see me? and did you think it very dreadful

when I came like that, peeping in at the door?"

John was not accustomed to be driven like this from one subject to another. By the time he had got himself to the vein of laughter she had become solemn; and now when his natural enthusiasm had been roused, she tossed him back again like a shuttlecock to the fun of the situation. Transitions so quick startled his unaccustomed mind. "I—was surprised," he faltered, looking at her, wondering what kind of creature this was that could jump from one mood to another in the twinkling of an eye.

"I never saw you sitting there in the corner," cried Kate. "I thought I had it all my own way. It was so stupid of me. You must have thought what a stupid she is, peeping, and never perceiving that she is found out. I can't tell you how ashamed I was when I saw you. Did you think I was a thief, or a mad woman, or what did you think?"

"I thought——" said John, and then in his embarrassment paused, not knowing how to make the compliment which rose to his lips. It was no compliment, so far as his conscious-

ness went. Had she been able to see into his mind, she would have seen an imagination too high-flown to be put into words. He could not give it any expression, having no experience as yet in the art of insinuated meanings. "Of course I knew it must be Miss Crediton," he said, with a blush, after that pause; and he had not even ventured with his eyes to say the rest, but looked down, confused, afraid to meet her glance, and played with his watch-chain, and felt himself a fool—which, indeed, Kate would scarcely have hesitated to say he was.

"After all it did not require a very close application of your mind to guess that," she said, half piqued; and then yawned softly, and then opened a book, and looked at two of the pictures,—and then added, "How long Mrs Mitford is of coming home!"

"Shall I go and look for her?" cried bewildered John, rising up with an alacrity which confirmed Kate in her low opinion of him. And he actually went away to the hall-door and took his hat, and went off down the avenue to quicken his mother's return, leaving Kate in

a state of consternation, which, after a few minutes, bubbled back into laughter. "Oh what a goose he is!" she said to herself, and yet was a little angry as well as annoyed that he should have gone away voluntarily, leaving her thus unamused and alone. It awoke a momentary question in her mind as to whether *he was worth the trouble*—a question which she summarily answered in the negative. Certainly not; he was a very good son, no doubt, and a handy man to have close by when your horse ran away with you—but as for anything else! Thus Kate resolved, making up her mind to leave him tranquil in his usual peace—a conclusion which had not the least practical effect upon her after-proceedings, as may be supposed.

Meanwhile John strode down the avenue in a very different frame of mind. The bees that had buzzed in Kate's ears when she saw him first had come into his now, and hummed and hummed about him, confusing his mind hopelessly. He had held her once for one moment in his arms, fighting a desperate battle for her with death and destruction. Such a thing might have been as that they should have

perished together, and been thus associated for evermore in an icy virginal union of death. If it had been so! the romance and the pathos charmed the foolish young fellow. And now here she was by his side, this creature whose life he had saved—who was his, as it were, by that very act, and belonged to him, whatever any one might say against it. All the same, she was nothing to him. She laughed when she mentioned lightly that strange bond. He had given her her life over again when she had lost it. It was his life, notwithstanding her laughter; and yet he did not know her, and she might pass away and leave no trace. But no—that was impossible. The trace was ineffaceable, he said to himself, and all that might come hereafter would never obliterate the fact that he had given her back her life, and that therefore that life belonged to him. It was not love at first sight, nor indeed any kind of love, which had smitten John; but he felt as if his claims were being ignored and laughed at, and yet were so real. She belonged to him, and yet she was nothing to him. “We are such stuff as dreams are made

of." This was the favourite principle of John Mitford's thoughts, and he let it take such possession of him on the strength of the curious connection and non-connection between himself and Kate, that he went along under the trees, crossing the sunshine, with the fumes of that talk in his head, like a man walking in his sleep. Mrs Mitford was coming up the avenue in her grey gown and white shawl, a point of brightness in the long green vista. She had a basket on her arm, and looked like the fairy godmother with miraculous gifts for the house. The way in which her white shawl blazed out and toned down as she passed from the light to the shade, and from the shade to the light, was wonderful. Half of the trees were lime-trees, and threw such silken dainty greennesses and softened tones of shadow upon that pretty apparition; and perhaps the bees in John's ears were only those which made the entire atmosphere harmonious, with that mingling of scent and sound which is the very crown of summer and June. There is no telling how pleased he was to see that white figure. There are moments, though perhaps

few sons would confess it, in which a man's mother is more shield to him than she even is to a girl. He could stay in the room without embarrassment if she were there. He would know what to say, or at least she would know what to lead him to say. She would save him from being thrust into the front of the conversation, and left to bear the brunt of it, which he was not equal to in his present state. The unknown heroine was her guest, and became at once natural and a matter of course in her presence. After-times, perhaps, might bring other necessities, but this was the most important now.

"Mother, we want you," said John; "give me your basket, and make haste. Miss Crediton has come down-stairs."

"Miss Crediton!" cried his mother, with a gasp. "Oh, the impatient naughty child! to take advantage as soon as I was out of the way. And have you made acquaintance with her, John?"

"Yes," he said, succinctly, taking the basket from his mother's hand.

"Yes—is that all? But how did you in-

troduce yourself, and what did she say, and what do you think of her? Oh dear, dear! I am afraid you must have been looking very forbidding, and frightened poor Kate—why was I away?”

“I don’t think I frightened her,” said John; “at least she laughed. I know I never laugh when I am frightened. She is all by herself in the big drawing-room. Take my arm, and come as quick as you can; she ought not to be left alone.”

“I don’t think she can come to any harm for five minutes,” said Mrs Mitford, and looked anxiously in her son’s face. She was a very good woman—as good a woman as ever was. But John was her only child, and Kate Crediton would be very rich, and was very *nice* and pretty and unexceptionable, and he had saved her life. Could it be wondered at if his mother was a little anxious about their first meeting? If she had not liked Kate, Mrs Mitford said to herself, of course she would never have thought of it. But she was very fond of Kate, and they were quite suitable in point of age; and John was so good—worthy a princess! What

a husband he would make ! his mother thought, looking up at him fondly. If Kate Crediton had such a companion as that, instead of some man of the world who would think less of her than of her money, what a happy thing it would be for her ! But “Don’t you think she is very charming, John ?” was all the designing woman said.

“Pretty, certainly,” said the young man, as if he had been speaking of a cabbage-rose, and with looks as steady as if his heart had not been working like a steam-engine, pumping warmth and life and waves of wild fancy through all his veins.

“Pretty !” cried Mrs Mitford, and drew her arm out of his in her impetuosity ; “I don’t know what you young men are made of nowadays. Why, *I* was thought pretty once ; and not in that calm manner neither,” she exclaimed, with a pretty blush, and a laugh at herself.

“Mamma mia, I never see anybody so pretty now,” said John, caressingly. “Perhaps if Miss Crediton lives thirty years longer, and keeps on improving every day, she may

get somewhere near you at last. She has the roses and lilies, but not the same sweet eyes."

"Foolish boy," said Mrs Mitford; "her eyes are far nicer than ever mine were. Mine were only brown, like most other people's—and Kate's are the loveliest blue, and that expression in them! I thought my son would know better, if nobody else did."

"But perhaps if your son did know better, it would be the worse for him," said John, without looking at her. He put his hands into his pockets again, and stared straight before him, and attempted a little weak distracted sort of whistle as he went on; and then a strange thrill ran all over the little woman by his side. She had been dreaming of it—planning it secretly in her mind for all these days—thinking how nice a thing it would be for John, who was not one to get riches for himself, or acquire gain in this selfish world. And now, what if it had come true? What if her son, who was all hers, had at this moment, in this innocent June morning, while she, all unsuspecting, was comforting the village people—strayed off from her

side for ever — taken the first step in that awful divergence which should lead him more and ever more apart into his own life, and his own house, and the arms of the wife who should supersede his mother? She bore it bravely, standing up, with a gasp in her throat and a momentary quiver of her lips and eyelids, to receive the blow. And he never knew anything about it, stalking on there with his shadow creeping sideways behind him, and his hands buried deep in his pockets; not a handsome figure, take him at his best, but yet all the world to the mother who bore him — and perhaps not much less, should she be such a woman as his mother was, to the coming wife. But surely that could never be Kate!

CHAPTER IV.

MR CREDITON came to dinner that evening, and met his daughter with suppressed but evident emotion, such as made Kate muse and wonder. "I knew he liked me, to be sure," she said afterwards to Mrs Mitford; "I knew he would miss me horribly; but I never expected him, you know, to look like that."

"Like what, my dear?"

"Like crying," said Kate, with a half-sob. They had left the gentlemen in the dining-room, and were straying round the garden in the twilight. Mr Crediton had been late, and had delayed dinner, and even the long June day had come to a close, and darkness was falling. The garden was full of the scent of roses, though all except the light ones were invisible in the darkness; tall pyramids of

white lilies stood up here and there like ghosts in the gloom, glimmering and odorous; and the soft perfume of the grateful earth, refreshed by watering and by softer dew, rose up from all the wide darkling space around. "I think it must be because it is a rectory garden that it is so sweet," said Kate, with a quick transition. By reason of being an invalid, she was leaning on Mrs Mitford's arm.

"Are you fond of rectories?" said her kind companion. "But you might see a great many without seeing such a spot as Fanshawe Regis. It is a pretty house, and a good house; and, my dear, you can't think what a pleasure it is to me to think that when we go, it will pass to my John."

"Oh!" said Kate; and then, after a pause, "Has he quite made up his mind to be a clergyman?" she said.

"Yes, indeed, I hope so," said his unsuspecting mother. "He is so well qualified for it. Not all the convenience in the world would have made me urge him to it, had I not seen he was worthy. But he was made

to be a clergyman—even the little you have seen of him, my dear——”

“You forget I have only seen him to-day,” said Kate; “and then I don’t know much about clergymen,” she went on, demurely. “I have always thought, you know, they were people to be very respectful of—one can’t laugh with a clergyman as one does with any other man; indeed I have never cared for clergymen—please don’t be angry—they have always seemed so much above me.”

“But a good man does not think himself above any one,” said Mrs Mitford, falling into the snare. “The doctor might stand upon his dignity, if any one should; but yet, Kate, my dear, he was quite content to marry an ignorant little woman like me.”

“Do you think clergymen ought to marry?” said Kate, with great solemnity, looking up in her face.

Mrs Mitford gave a great start, and fell back from her young companion’s side. “Kate!” she cried, “you never told me you were High Church!”

“Am I High Church? I don’t think so;

but one has such an idea of a clergyman," said Kate, "that he should be so superior to all that. I can't understand him thinking of—a girl, or any such nonsense. I feel as if he ought to be above such things."

"But, my dear, after all, a clergyman is but a man," said Mrs Mitford, suddenly driven to confusion, and not knowing what plea to employ.

"Should he be just a man?" asked Kate, with profound gravity. "Shouldn't they be examples to all of us? I think they should be kept apart from other people, and even look different. I should not like to be intimate—not very intimate, you know—with a clergyman. I should feel as if it was wrong—when they have to teach us, and pray for us, and all that. Your son is not a clergyman yet, or I should never have ventured to speak to him as I did to-day."

"But, you dear simple - minded child," cried Mrs Mitford, half delighted with such an evidence of goodness, half confused by the thought of how this theory might affect her boy, "that is all very true; but unless they

became monks at once, I don't see how your notion could be carried out; and the experience of the Roman Catholics, dear, has shown us what a dreadful thing it is to make men monks. So that, you see, clergymen must mix in the world; and I am quite sure it is best for them to marry. When you consider how much a woman can do in a parish, Kate, and what a help she is, especially if her husband is very superior——”

“I don't know, I am sure,” said Kate; “perhaps, in that case, you know, women should be the clergymen. But I do think they should be put up upon pedestals, and one should not be too familiar with them. Marrying a clergyman would be dreadful. I don't know how any one could have the courage to do it. I suppose people did not look at things in that light when you were young?”

“No, indeed,” said Mrs Mitford, with a little warmth; “there were no High Church notions in my days. One thought one was doing the best one could for God, and that one had one's work to do as well as one's husband. And, my dear,” said the good woman, dropping into

her usual soft humility, "I think you would think so, too, if you knew what the parish was when I came into it. Not that I have done much—not near so much, not half so much, as I ought to have done—but still, I think——"

"As if I ever doubted that!" cried Kate; "but then—not many are like you."

"Oh yes, my dear! a great many," said Mrs Mitford, with a smile of pleasure. "Even Mr Crediton's pretty Kate, though he says she is a wilful little puss—if it came to be her fate to marry a clergyman——"

"That it never can be," said Kate; "oh, dear, no! In the first place, papa would hate it; and, in the next place, I should—hate it myself."

"Ah! my dear," said Mrs Mitford, feeling, nevertheless, as if she had received a down-right blow, "that all depends upon the man."

They had come round in their walk to the path which led past the dining-room windows, where the blinds were but half dropped and the lights shining, and sounds of voices were audible as the gentlemen sat over their wine.

It was the two elder men only who were talking—Dr Mitford's precise tones, and those of Mr Crediton, which sounded, Kate thought, more "worldly." John was taking no part in the conversation. Some time before, while they had still been at a little distance, Kate had seen him under the blind fidgeting in his chair, and listening to the sound of the footsteps outside. She knew as well that he was longing to join his mother and herself as if he had said it, and looked at him with an inward smile and philosophical reflection, whether a man who gave in so easily could be worth taking any trouble about. And yet, perhaps, it was not to Kate he had given in, but to the first idea of woman, the first enchantress whom he could make an idol of. "He shall not make an idol of me," she said to herself; "if he cares for me, it must be as *me*, and not as a fairy princess." This thought had just passed through her mind when she answered Mrs Mitford, which she did with a little nod of obstinacy and elevation of her drooping head.

"I am sure everything would not depend on the man, so far as I am concerned," she

said. "Men are all very well, but you must take everything into account before you go and sacrifice yourself to them. One man is very much like another, so far as I can see. One doesn't expect to meet a Bayard nowadays."

"But why not, my dear?" said Mrs Mitford. "There are Bayards in the world as much as there ever were. I am sure I know one. If it had been the time for knights, he would have been a Bayard; and as it is not the time for knights, he is the very best, the truest, and tenderest! No one ever knew him to think of himself. Oh, my dear! there are some men whose circumstances you never would think of—not even you."

"But I am very worldly," said Kate, shaking her head; "that is how I have been brought up. If I cared for anybody who was poor, I should give him no rest till he got rich. If I did not like his profession, or anything, I should make him change it. I don't mean to say I approve of myself, and, of course, you can't approve of me, but I *know* that is what I should do."

"I think we had better go in and have some tea," said Mrs Mitford, with a half-sigh. There was some regret in it for the heiress whom John had manifestly lost, for it was certain that a girl with such ideas would never touch John's heart ; and there was some satisfaction, too, for she should have her boy to herself.

"It is so sweet out here," said Kate, with gentle passive opposition, "and there are the gentlemen coming out to join us—at least, there is your son."

"John is so fond of the garden," said Mrs Mitford, with another little sigh. She felt disposed to detach Kate's arm from her own, and run to her boy and warn him. But politeness forbade such a step, and his mother's wistful eyes watched his tall figure approaching in the darkness—approaching unconscious to his fate.

"We were talking of you," said Kate, with a composure which filled Mrs Mitford with dismay, "and about clergymen generally. I should be frightened if I were you—one would have to be so very, very good. Don't you ever feel frightened when you think that you will

have to teach everybody, and set everybody a good example? I think the very thought would make me wicked, if it were me."

"Should it?" said John,—and his mother thought with a little dread that he looked more ready to enter into the talk than she had ever seen him before; "but then I don't understand how you could be wicked if you were to try."

"Ah! but I do," said Kate, "and I could not bear it. Do you really like being a clergyman? you who are so young and—different. I can fancy it of an old gentleman like Dr Mitford; but you——"

"I am not a clergyman yet," said John, with a half-audible sigh.

"And Dr Mitford is not so old," said his mother, "though I suppose everybody who is over twenty looks old to you; but Miss Crediton means that you must feel like a clergyman, my dear boy, already. I am sure you do!"

"I don't see how you can be so sure," said John; and perhaps for the first time in his life he felt angry with his mother. Why should she answer for him in this way when he was

certainly old enough and had sense enough to answer for himself? He was a little piqued with her, and turned from her towards the young stranger, whom he had spoken to for the first time that day. "I am secular enough at present," he said; "you need not be sorry for me. There is still time to reflect."

"It is never any good reflecting," said Kate; "if you are going in for anything, I think you should do it and never mind. The more one thinks the less one knows what to do."

"And oh, my dear, don't jest about such subjects!" said Mrs Mitford. "Don't you recollect what we are told about him that puts his hand to the plough and looks back?"

"And is turned into a pillar of salt?" said Kate, demurely. "Mr John, that would never do. I should not like to see you turned into a pillar of salt. Let us think of something else. How sweet it is out here in the dark! The air is just raving about those roses. If you could not see them, you would still know they were there. I like an old-fashioned garden. Is that a ghost up against the buttress there, or is it another great sheaf of lilies? If

I had such a garden as this, I should never care to go anywhere else."

"My dear, I hope you will come here as often as you like," said Mrs Mitford, with hospitable warmth; and then she thought of the danger to John, and stopped short and felt a little confused. "The Huntleys are friends of yours, are not they?" she went on, faltering. "When you are with them, it will be so easy to run over here."

"Oh, indeed, I should much rather come here at first hand, if you will have me," said Kate, frankly. "I don't think I am fond of the Huntleys. They are nice enough, but—— And, dear Mrs Mitford, I would rather go to you than to any one, you have been so good to me—that is, if you like me to come here."

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs Mitford, half touched, half troubled, "if I could think there was any amusement for you——"

"Whether there may be amusement or not, there must always be a welcome. I am sure, mother, that is what you meant to say," said John, with a certain suppressed indigna-

tion in his tone, which went to his mother's heart.

"Oh yes," she said, more and more confused; "Miss Crediton knows that. If she can put up with our quietness—if she does not mind the seclusion. We have not seen so much of the Huntleys as we ought to have seen lately, but when they are here——"

"I had much rather come when you were quite quiet. I love quiet," said deceitful Kate, putting her face so close to her friend's shoulder as almost to touch it in a caressing way she had. Mrs Mitford trembled with a presentiment of terror, and yet she could not resist the soft half-caress.

"My dear child!" she cried, pressing Kate's arm to her side. And John loomed over them both, a tall shadow, with a face which beamed through the darkness; they looked both so little beside him—soft creatures, shadowy, with wavy uncertain outlines, melting into the dark, not clear and black and well defined like himself—moving softly, with a faint rustle in the air, which might almost have been wings. His mother and——what

was Kate to him ? Nothing—a stranger—a being from a different sphere ; yet, at the same time, the one creature in all the world upon whom he had a supreme claim, whose life he had fought for, and rescued out of the very jaws of death.

After this they went in with eyes a little dazzled by the sudden change into the drawing-room, where the lamps were lighted, and the moths came sweeping in at the open window, strange optimists, seeking the light at all costs. Kate threw herself down in a great chair, in the shadiest corner, her white dress giving forth (poor John thought) a kind of reflected radiance, moon-like and subdued. She sank down in the large wide seat, and gave a little yawn. “I’m so tired,” she said ; “I think I shall make papa carry me upstairs.”

“Not your papa, my dear,” said Mrs Mitford, who, to tell the truth, was a little matter-of-fact ; “not your papa. He does not look very strong, and it would be too much for him. The servants can do it ; or perhaps John——”

John started up, and came forward with his eyes lit up, half with eagerness, half with fun. He had held her in his arms before, but she had not been conscious of that. "Oh, please!" cried Kate, in alarm, "I did not mean it; I only said it in fun—for want of something else to say."

"That is Kate's general motive for her observations," said Mr Crediton, who had just then come in with Dr Mitford; "and heaven knows it is apparent in them! but if I don't carry her up-stairs, I must carry her home. She must have been no end of a trouble to you."

"Oh no—not yet, I hope," said Mrs Mitford, still with some confusion. She cast a rapid glance over the situation. In less than three months John was going up for ordination. After that, she reflected, his mind would be settled, and such an interruption would do him less harm. "But I feel it is very selfish trying to keep her when, I daresay, you have a great many pleasant engagements," she went on, with diplomatic suavity; "and we are so quiet here. Only you must bring

her back again, Mr Crediton—that you must promise me—in autumn, or at Christmas the very latest——”

She caught John's eye, and faltered and stopped short; and then, of all people in the world, it was Dr Mitford who interposed.

“I should say it was the doctor who had to be consulted first,” he said. “After an illness I make it a principle never to move till I have consulted my medical man. This is a rule which I never transgress, my dear, as you know—and we must do the same by our young friend. You can decide after he has been here.”

“But the fact is, Kate, if you don't come at once you will come to an empty house,” said her father. “I have to go up to town on election business, and I should like to be here to take my girl home.”

“Then she shall wait till you come back,” said Dr Mitford; “and now that is settled, if you will come with me to my library I will show you the old charter I was speaking of. It is the earliest of the kind I have ever seen. You will find it very curious. It grants the

privilege of sanctuary to all the Abbey precincts"—he went on, as he opened the door for his guest, talking all the way. They could hear the sound of his voice going along the oak passage which led to the library, though they could not make out the words; and somehow it seemed to have a kind of soporific effect upon the party left behind, who sat and gazed at each other, and listened as if anxious to catch the last word.

"What is all settled?" cried Kate, who was the first to break the silence. "Oh, please, am I to take sanctuary in the Abbey precincts, or what is to be done with me? I should so like to know!"

"Mr Crediton has consented that you should stay," cried John, eagerly. Kate took no more notice of him than if he had been a cabbage, but bent forward to Mrs Mitford, ignoring all other authority. And what could that good woman do, who was not capable of hurting the feelings of a fly?

"My dear," she said, faltering, "what would be the use of going home when your papa is going away? Much better stay with me, if

you can make up your mind to the quiet. We are so very quiet here."

"But you said Christmas," said Kate, who was a little mortified, and did not choose to be unavenged.

"I said—I was thinking—I meant you to understand—— Oh! what is it, Lizzie?" cried Mrs Mitford, eagerly, as the maid came to the door. "Widow Blake?—oh yes, I am coming;" and she went away but too gladly to escape the explanation. Then there was nobody left in the drawing-room but Kate alone with John.

The girl turned her eyes upon him with their surprised ingenuous look, and then with profound gravity addressed him: "Mr John, tell me—you know what is best for her better than I do. Is it not convenient to have me now?"

"Convenient!" cried the young man; "how is such a word to be applied to you? It could never be but a delight to all of us——"

"Oh, hush, hush," said Kate; "don't pay me any compliments. You know I am only a stranger, though somehow I feel as if you

all belonged to me. It is because your mother has been so kind; and then—you saved my life.”

“That was nothing,” cried John; “I wish it had cost me something, then I might have felt as if I deserved——”

“What? my thanks?” she said, softly, playing with him.

“No, but to have saved you—for I did save you; though it did not cost me anything,” he said, regretfully; “and that is what I shall grudge all my life.”

“How very droll you are!” said Kate, after a long look at him, in which she tried to fathom what he meant without succeeding; “but never mind what it cost you. My opinion is, that, after such a thing as that, people become a sort of relations—don’t you think so? and you are bound to tell me when I ask you. Please, Mr John, is it convenient for your mother to have me now?—should I stay now? I shall be guided by what you say.”

He gave an abrupt idiotic laugh, and got up and walked about the room. “Of course you must stay,” he said; “of course it is con-

venient. What could it be else? It would be cruel to leave us so abruptly, after all."

"Well, I am very comfortable," said Kate; "I shall like it. The only thing was for your mother. If she should not want me to stay—but anyhow, the responsibility is upon you now; and so, as Dr Mitford says, as we have settled that, tell me what we are going to do."

"To do?" said John, with open eyes.

"To amuse ourselves," said Kate; "for I am a stranger, you know. How can I tell how you amuse yourselves in this house?"

"We don't amuse ourselves at all," said John; and as he had been coming nearer and nearer, now he drew a chair close to her sofa, and sat down and gazed at her with a new light in his face. He laughed, and yet his eyes glowed with a serious fire. He was amused and surprised, and yet the serious nature underneath gave a certain meaning to everything. He took the remark not as the natural expression of a frivolous, amusement-loving creature, but as a sudden, sweet suggestion which turned to him all at once the

brighter side of life. "I think we have rather supposed that amusement was unnecessary—that it was better, perhaps, not to be happy. I don't know. In England, I suspect, many people think that."

"But you are happy—you must be happy," said Kate. "What! with this nice house, and such a nice dear mother—and Dr Mitford too, I mean, of course—and just come from the university, which all the men pretend to like so much. I do not believe you have not been happy, Mr John."

"I am very happy now," said John Mitford, with a dawning faculty for saying pretty things of which he had been himself totally unconscious. He did not mean it as a compliment; and when Kate gave the faintest little shrug of her pretty shoulders, he was bewildered and discouraged. The words were commonplace enough to her, and they were not commonplace but utterly original to him. He was happy, and it was she who had made him so. It never occurred to the young man that any fool could say as much, it was so simply, fully true in his case. And he sat

and glowed upon her with his new-kindled eyes. Yes, it was true what she said—she was a stranger, and yet she belonged to them ; or rather, she belonged to him. He might not be worthy of it. He had done nothing to deserve it, and yet through him her life had come back to her. He had saved her. He was related to her as no man else in the world was. Her life had been lost, and he had given it back. His mind was so full of this exulting thought that he forgot to say anything ; and as for Kate, she had to let him gaze at her, with amusement at first, then with a blush, and with a movement of impatience at the last.

“Mr John,” she said, turning her head away, and taking up a book to screen her, “I am sure you don’t mean to be disagreeable ; but—did you never—see—a girl before ?”

“Good heavens ! what a brute I am !” cried poor John ; and then he added humbly, “no, Miss Crediton, I never saw—any one—before.”

Upon which Kate laughed, and he, taking courage, laughed too, withdrawing his guilty

eyes, and blazing red to his very hair. And when Mrs Mitford came back, she could not but think that on the whole they had made a great deal of progress. The two fathers were in the library for a long time over that charter, and Kate's merry talk soon beguiled the yielding mother. When the tea came, she sat apart and made it, and watched the young ones with her tender eyes. It seemed to her that she had never seen her boy so happy. "She must have been making fun of me with all that about the clergymen," Mrs Mitford said to herself; "and but for that, what could I desire more?" And she thought of John's happiness with such a wife, and of Kate's fortune, and of what a blessing it would be if it could be brought about; and sighed—as indeed most people do when it appears to them as if their prayers were about to be granted, and nothing left to them more to desire.

CHAPTER V.

“WELL, Kate, I will leave you here since you wish it,” Mr Crediton said next morning before he went away ; “but first I must warn you to mind what you are about. They are very nice people, and have been very good to you—but I think I had rather have left you at home all the same. See that you don’t repay good with evil—that’s all.”

“You must have a very poor opinion of me, papa,” said Kate, demurely ; “but how could I do that if I were to try ?”

Mr Crediton shook his head. “I have a great mind to carry you off still,” he said. “I don’t feel at all sure that you have not begun it already. Kate, there is that young man to whom I owe your life——”

This expression touched her deeply. It

was not, to whom *you* owe your life ;—that would have been commonplace. “Dear papa,” said Kate, embracing his arm with both hands, and putting down her head upon it, “I always wonder why you took the trouble to care for me so much.”

“I suppose it’s for your mother’s sake,” he answered, looking down upon his child with eyes which were liquid and tender with love ; but such a little episode was only for a moment. “Let us come back to our subject,” he said. “Don’t make that boy unhappy, Kate. That would be a very poor return. He looks something of a cub, but I hear he is a very good fellow, and he saved your life. Let him alone. He deserves it at your hands.”

“What ! to be let alone ! What a curious way of showing one’s gratitude !” cried Kate. “No, papa, I know a way worth two of that. He shall be my friend. There shall be no nonsense—that I can promise you ; but to pay no attention to him would be horribly ungrateful. I could not do it. Besides, he is very nice—not the sort of man you would ever fall in love with, but very nice—for a friend.”

“Ah! I put no faith in your friends,” said Mr Crediton, shaking his head. “I have a great mind to take you home after all.”

“But that would be breaking faith with Mrs Mitford,” said Kate. Her father turned upon her one of those strange, doubtful looks, with which men often compliment women—as much as to say, You wonderful, incomprehensible creature, I don’t know what you would be at. I can’t understand you; but as I must trust you all the same—— “Well,” he said, aloud, with a shake of his head, “I suppose you must have your way; but I won’t have this young fellow made game of, Kate.”

“As if I could ever think of such a thing!” she said, indignantly; and thus he had to go at last, not without a qualm of conscience, leaving Kate and her dresses and her maid in possession of the house. She stayed most of the morning in her own room after he had gone, that nobody might say she was too impetuous in her rush upon the prey, but came down to luncheon with all the charming familiarity yet restraint of a young lady staying in the house, ready to be amused, and yet de-

manding nothing. The first thing she met when she entered the room was John's eyes watching the door, looking for her. Poor fellow!—those same eyes which had struck her first when she opened her own in this strange yet so familiar house.

“I do not know that we have ever had a young lady here before. Have we ever had a young lady here before, my dear?” said Dr Mitford. “As it is an opportunity which does not occur every day, we must make the most of it. Miss Crediton, Mrs Mitford, of course, has her own occupations, but, so far as the men of the house are concerned, command us—you must let us know what you like best.”

“Oh, please, Doctor Mitford! fancy my dragging *you* out to go places with me,” cried Kate. “I should be so dreadfully ashamed of myself! I don't want to do anything, please. I want you to let me be just as if I were at home. I want to go to the schools, and the poor people, and take walks, and play croquet, as if I belonged to you;” and then she recollected herself, and caught a curious ardent look from John, and a still more

curious inquiring one from his mother, and blushed violently, and stopped short all at once.

“But that cannot be,” said Dr Mitford, who noticed neither the blush nor the sudden pause, and, indeed, did not understand why conversation should be interrupted by such foolish unforeseen accidents. “I hope we are not so regardless of the duties of hospitality as that. Let me think what there is to see in the neighbourhood. What is there to see, John? There is a very interesting Roman camp at Dulchester, and there are some curious remains of the old Abbey at St Bidulph’s, about which there has been a great deal of controversy: if you are at all interested in archæology——”

“Oh, please!” cried Kate, and then she gave Mrs Mitford a piteous look, “don’t let me be a nuisance to any one—pray don’t. I shall be quite happy in the garden, and taking walks about. If I had thought I should be a nuisance to any one I should have gone home.”

“On the contrary,” Dr Mitford went on in his old-fashioned way, “John and I will feel

ourselves only too fortunate. Mrs. Mitford is always busy in the parish—that is her way ; but if you will accept my escort, Miss Crediton——”

And the old gentleman waved his hand with old-fashioned gallantry. He was a little old gentleman, with beautiful snow-white hair and a charming complexion, and the blackest of coats and the whitest of linen. He was so clean that it was almost painful to look at him. He was like a Dutch house, all scrubbed and polished, and whitened and blackened to absolute perfection. He was not a man who thought it wrong theoretically to be happy, though his son had almost hinted as much ; but it never occurred to him to take any trouble about the matter. In short, his nature made no special demands upon him for happiness. If things went well it was so much the better ; if not, why, there was no great harm done. He was above the reach of any particular strain of evil fortune. Nothing could be more unlikely than that he should ever have to change his dinner-hour, or any of his favourite habits ; and if his wife or his

son had been very ill, or had died, or any calamity of that sort had happened, the Doctor hoped he had Christian fortitude to bear it; and anything less than this he could scarcely have realised as unhappiness. Why, then, with the dinner-hour immovable, and everything else comfortably settled, should people trouble themselves searching for amusement? The worst of this principle was, that when it came to be a right and necessary thing to seek amusement—when, for instance, a young lady was staying in the house—Dr Mitford was a little embarrassed. Amusement had become a duty in such a case, but how was it to be found? So he thought of the Roman camp and the ruins of St Biddulph's, and that was all the length his invention could reach.

“She is not strong enough yet for these long expeditions,” said Mrs Mitford, coming to Kate's aid; “she must be left quite quiet with me, I think. I am sure that will be the doctor's opinion. Yes, my dear, I will take you to the schools; there are some such nice little things that it is a pleasure to teach, and

there are some of my poor people that I know you would like——”

“Mother, mother, do you think that is what interests Miss Crediton?” said John, with that quick sense of his parents’ imperfections which is so common to the young. A Roman camp on the one side, and the old women in the village on the other, proposed as amusement for this bright-eyed fairy creature, to whom every joy and rapture that the world possessed must come natural! Did not music seem to come up about her out of the very earth as she walked, and everything to dance before her, and the flowers to give out sweeter odours, and the very sun to shine more warmly? John was not learned in delights, any more than his father and mother, but yet nothing less than the superlative was good enough for her—to preside over tournaments, and give prizes of love and beauty; to be the queen of the great festivals of poetry; to have everything indefinite and sweet and splendid laid at her feet. It was so strange that they should not understand!

“I shall delight in seeing the old women,”

said Kate, with a laugh, which he thought was addressed to him ; “ but, indeed, I don’t think I can teach anything—I am so dreadfully ignorant. You can’t think how ignorant I am. We have a school at Fernwood, and I went once and they gave me sums to look over—sums, Mrs Mitford—only fancy ! and I was to tell if they were right or wrong. It was little chits of eight or nine that had done them, and I could not have done one for my life ; so, please, I can’t pretend to teach.”

“ My dear,” said Mrs Mitford, beaming upon her with maternal eyes, “ you are not a clergyman’s wife.”

“ Thank heaven !” said Kate ; and then it occurred to her that she had been rude, and the colour stole to her cheek. “ Oh, I beg your pardon ; I did not mean to be impertinent.”

“ You were not impertinent, my dear,” said Mrs Mitford, with a sigh. “ I daresay you are quite right. One likes one’s own lot best, you know ; but unless you took to it, there could not be much pleasure in being a clergyman’s wife.”

“Oh, please, don’t think I was rude,” cried Kate, “to you, dear Mrs Mitford, that have been so very, very good to me! All I thought was, that perhaps — nowadays, — but never mind what nonsense came into my head. May I go to see Lizzie’s mother? I have been hearing so much about her, and about the trouble they have with the big lads.”

“My dear, that is not amusement for a young lady,” said Dr Mitford. “If you will come with me, Miss Crediton, I assure you, you will like it better. I will drive you to the Roman camp. There are some measurements I want to verify. I am writing a paper for the Archæological Society, and they are sad fellows to pick holes in one’s coat. You must tell them, John, to have the phaeton out, and I will drive Miss Crediton over to Dulchester this afternoon. We could not have a more charming day.”

“And you can call at the Huntleys, and have some tea, Doctor,” said Mrs Mitford; “it is a long drive. Miss Crediton is a friend of theirs. It will be more amusing for her; and if you would ask the girls to come over

to-morrow, perhaps we might get up a croquet-party. Frederick Huntley has come home, so that would be another man. There are no young men in the parish, that is the sad thing, when one wants to get up a little party," said Mrs Mitford, with depression. She was looking quite weary and miserable, and did not know what to do with herself. Amusement for the young lady staying in the house! How was she to procure it? You feed caterpillars, when you collect them, with green leaves, and birds have their appropriate seed, and even sea-anemones in an aquarium; but when there are no young men in a parish, how are you to feed a stray young lady? This was the frightful problem which clouded over Mrs Mitford's soul. And this was complicated by the harder difficulty still, which continually returned upon her—a girl who thanked heaven she was not a clergyman's wife! Was it right to leave such a creature in unfettered intercourse with John?

Kate made one or two ineffectual struggles to deliver herself from her fate, but when she saw the phaeton drive up—an ancient spidery-

looking vehicle, with room only for two—her spirit was cowed within her. There was no way of escape short of being taken suddenly ill, and she could not be so unkind as that. She reserved the card in her hand for future use, should this persecution be continued. “I hope I shan’t get ill when Dr Mitford is so kind,” she said, as she was helped into the shabby little carriage. It was the only one they had at Fanshawe, and they thought a great deal of it. It was high, and the wheels were large, and the hood toppled about so, it looked as if it must tumble down on their noses every minute—and Kate had carriages of her own, and knew what was what in this respect; and she did not care in the least about the Roman camp, and the roads were very dusty, and would spoil her clean pretty dress. Nevertheless she had to yield like a martyr, and indeed felt herself very like one as she drove away by Dr Mitford’s side, leaving John standing looking very blank on the lawn. “Why could not he come too?” Kate said to herself; and called him *fainéant* and sluggard in her heart. But, after all, there

was no room for John. He watched, feeling much more blank even than she did, as the carriage rattled away, and by-and-by was joined by his mother, who, for her part, was rather pleased to get rid of her visitor for half a day at least. Mrs Mitford laid her hand on her son's shoulder as she came to him, but John took no notice, and only gazed the more at the carriage rattling and grinding and wheezing away.

"My dear boy!" she said, looking at him with tender admiring eyes, and smoothing his sleeve with her soft hand as if she loved it, "don't look after them like that. You have seen the camp at Dulchester before now."

"Oh yes—fifty times at least," said John, turning away with a derisive grin. "You don't think I care for that?"

"Then why should you look so blank?" said his mother. "Miss Crediton is very nice, but, do you know, I am afraid it will be very hard work entertaining her. I am sure I don't know what to do. If the Huntleys come to-morrow, that will be enough (I hope) for one day. And then we might have a

dinner-party ; but I can't think she would care for a dinner-party. I am sure I should not at her age. Your papa thinks that is the proper thing ; but fancy one of our ordinary parties, with the Fanshawes and the Lancasters and the doctor, and some curate to fill up—what would that be to her ? ”

“ Mamma,” said John, “ I am sure you are taking a great deal too much trouble. Why not leave Miss Crediton alone ? She has gone to-day only to please my father. She does not care for Roman camps any more than I do, nor for a drive in a shabby old phaeton with defective springs.”

“ My dear, you are doing her injustice,” said Mrs Mitford, with severe loftiness. “ She is rather frivolous, I fear ; but still, you may be sure Kate understands that to have the Doctor to drive her, and tell her all about the country, is what very few people attain.”

To this speech John made no reply. The carriage was out of sight, and even the dust it had raised had dropped peacefully to earth again ; but still the young man stood with a dissatisfied face. “ I could have taken her for

a walk, and she would have liked it better," he said—"at least *I* should have liked it better; and I am sure she does not want such a fuss made over her, mamma."

"*You* would have liked it better!" said Mrs Mitford. "Oh, my dear, dear boy! did you hear what she said this morning, John, about a clergyman's wife?"

"Yes."

"And yesterday what a tirade about clergymen! She made me half angry. As if your papa would have been a better man had he not married me!"

"I don't think that was what she meant," said John. "My father—is—different. One does not think of him, nor of what *is*. One thinks of what *is* to be."

"Then, perhaps, you agree with her, and think clergymen should not marry?" said Mrs Mitford, with a little heat. "Oh John! if you were to turn out a Ritualist, I think it would break my heart."

"I don't intend to turn out an anythingist," said John, shutting his face up into an obstinate blank which his mother knew. She

gave a sigh, and shook her head, and once more softly stroked his arm.

“And since we are speaking of this,” she said, sinking her voice, and smoothing down his sleeve more and more tenderly, with her eyes fixed on it, as if that was the object of her thoughts, “I have one little word to say to you, John—just one word. My dear boy! you are very young, and you don’t know the world, nor the ways of girls. She is very pretty, and winning, and all that; but I would not put myself too much at her service, if I were you. It might not be good for yourself—and it might put things in her head.”

“Put things in *her* head,” echoed poor John. “O mother, mother! as if she would care twopence if she never saw me again! But I know what you mean, and I don’t mean to lose my head or my senses. She is out of my reach. I am not so simple but I can see that.”

“And that is just what I can’t see,” said his mother, sharply. “She is not a duchess; but, my dear, the prudent way is to have no more to do with her than just friendliness and civility. I am so glad you see that.”

“Oh yes, I see it,” John replied, with a shrug of his shoulders. “I’ll go and see to the mowing of the lawn, since there’s to be croquet to-morrow—a thing I detest,” he added, with irritation, as he moved away. Poor John! His mother looked after him, wondering was he really so wise as he said, or was this mere pride and disappointment—or what was it? There had never been a young lady before at Fanshawe Regis since the boy had grown up; for Miss Lancaster at the Priory was nearly old enough to be his mother, and the young Fanshawes were very delicate, and always travelling about in search of health, and the Doctor’s little girls were in the nursery. And as for the Huntleys, though they were so rich, they were comparatively new people in the country, and the girls were plain; so that pretty Kate Crediton was doubly dangerous. Ah! if she had only been a good girl—one of those girls who are so common—or at least everybody says so—who adore clergymen, and work slippers for them! Few such young ladies had fallen in Mrs Mitford’s way; but she believed in them, on the

authority of the newspapers, as most people do. If Kate had been but one of those, with her nice fortune and her nice position, and her pretty manners and looks, what a thing for John ! Mrs Mitford heaved a sigh over this dream, which, alas ! it seemed but too clear she must relinquish ; and with the sigh breathed a prayer that her boy might be protected from all snares, and not led into temptation more than he could bear.

John himself went off peremptorily to the gardener, and disturbed him among his vegetables. He was busy with the cucumbers, and considered the lawn at that moment worse than vanity. But John's temper was up, thanks to his father who had thus carried her off from him under his very nose, and poor Roots had no chance against him. When he had effectually spoiled that poor man's morning's work, the young fellow went off sullenly enough with his fishing-rod. She was out of his reach, no doubt. She thanked heaven she was no clergyman's wife ; but yet—— The only man in the world, so far as John knew, who had any right to her was himself—more

right than her father. Her life was his, for he had given it back to her. Of all ties on earth, could there be one more binding? not that he meant to make any ungenerous use of his claim, or even to breathe it in words; but yet he knew it, and she knew it. He had given her back her life.

CHAPTER VI.

As for Kate and Dr Mitford, they did not know very well what to say to each other. "What a charming day!" the girl said at intervals; "and what a pretty country! I never knew it until I took that unfortunate ride."

"Don't speak of that," said the old gentleman; "at least don't speak of it *so*. It was a most fortunate ride, I am sure, for us."

"It makes me giddy when I think of it," said Kate, shutting her eyes.

"You are very fond of riding, I suppose? I am always rather nervous when I see a lady on a spirited horse. You are very charming riders, and very full of courage, and all that," said the Doctor, who was himself considerably bothered by the mild animal he was driving; "but it requires a man's hand, my dear Miss

Crediton. There are some things, believe me, that require a man's hand."

"Yes, no doubt," said Kate, politely, longing all the time to take the reins into her own small nervous fingers. Dr Mitford had a nice little white soft hand—a clergyman's hand—without any bone or fibre in it. "We made up our minds quite suddenly," she went on, "that we would go back from Humbledon to Camelford, riding. I had often heard of Fanshawe Regis, but I never saw it before."

"Most people have heard of Fanshawe Regis," said the Doctor. "I consider my library one of the lions of the country—not that it is so very old, only Elizabethan, or, at the farthest, Henry the Seventh; but household architecture is a thing by itself. We expect the Archæological Society to hold its next meeting at Camelford, and then I hope much light may be thrown upon our antiquities. We shall make an excursion to Dulchester, Miss Crediton, and you must come with us there."

"Oh, I am sure I am much obliged," said Kate.

“You would enjoy that,” said Dr Mitford. “Downy is sure to be there from Oxford, and I should not wonder if he gave a lecture on it. He is one of the very great guns. He understands more about it than almost any man in England, I must say, to do him justice. But almost is not all, my dear Miss Crediton; and when you see a man setting himself up for an authority in presence of others who——” Here the Doctor stopped, and laughed a conscious complacent laugh; by which Kate perceived that Dr Mitford himself was a greater authority still, or at least thought he was.

“It is very funny,” said Kate, “but I shall be better off going with you than if I had half-a-dozen archæological societies. I feel quite sure of that.”

“Well, well, we must not brag,” said Dr Mitford, waving his white hand softly. “This camp, you must know, was one of the camps of Agricola, which he made on his journey northwards. It is constructed——”

And so the narrative went on. Kate kept looking up at him with her bright eyes, and

said yes, and said no, and made herself very agreeable ; but I cannot undertake to say that she was much the better for it. In the first place, she took no interest whatever in Roman camps, and then she had a good deal on her mind. What was John about all this time ? Why did not he manage to get into the phaeton in his father's place, and drive her ? If the horse had not been the meekest and most long-suffering of animals, Kate felt that there must have been another running away, and another accident. And her recent experience had made her nervous. When she had received an immense deal of information about the *castrum* which she was going with so little enthusiasm to visit, she suddenly caught a glimpse of a group of turrets among the trees, and gave a start, which made Dr Mitford and his horse swerve aside, and shook the hood of the phaeton so that it nearly descended upon the party, burying them alive.

“ Oh, there is Westbrook, where the Huntleys live ! ” cried Kate. “ I beg your pardon, Dr Mitford, I am sure. Mrs Mitford said we were to call. Don't you think we had better

go now, in case they should be out? There was a message, you know, that you were to give."

"Oh, about croquet," said the Doctor, and his brow was slightly ruffled. He would not allow, even to himself, that his instruction was slighted; but still he felt that she had been able to see the towers of Westbrook at the very moment when he was affording her every information. But he was too polite to make any objection. Westbrook was a very fine house, but its turrets were new, and its wealth had been made, not inherited, for which half the country said, "So much the more credit to the Huntleys;" and all the country, even the poor clergymen and the country doctors, looked down upon them, though not upon their parties, which were unexceptionable. Mr Crediton being himself only a banker, had not much indulged in this universal condescension; and Kate was very glad to bethink herself of the Huntleys at this special moment. They were better than Dulchester, and the phaeton with the unsteady hood. There were two sons and two daughters. The girls were

plain, and no way remarkable ; neither was Willie, the second son ; but Fred was very clever—so clever that nobody knew what was to be done with him. He had taken a first-class at Oxford, and done everything else a young man can do that is gratifying and honourable. He was fellow of his college, and was understood to be able to do anything he pleased in the way of scholarship or literature. If he had but taken the trouble to write, a great many people were of opinion that he would have beaten Tennyson hollow ; but he was indolent, and satisfied with his position, and had as much as ever he could desire without doing anything for it. And consequently, his great gifts were unexercised. The country, however, which had been cold to his family, and patronised them, acknowledged that such condescension would be out of character to a man who had taken a first-class. And thus the Huntleys had risen in popular estimation. Kate recalled Mrs Mitford's words to her mind as they drove unwillingly up to the great door. "Frederick is at home." She had known Frederick for years, but he was too

much self-absorbed, Kate thought, ever to care for any girl; and so it happened that not even flirtation had ever passed between them. "That prig to play croquet!" she said to herself, with a shrug of her shoulders; and then she sprang down, and received a farewell blow from the hood of the phaeton upon her pretty bonnet. Poor Kate! It was all she could do to restrain herself from shaking her little fist at it. The tears almost came to her eyes as she straightened the injured bonnet with her hands. Was it an evil omen? for the Huntleys were out, all but Mrs Huntley—and the girls were engaged for next day; and Willie had gone to town; and Fred—— "My dear, you know I never can answer for Fred," his mother said, with pride. "He has his own engagements, and all sorts of things to do."

"Oh yes, to be sure; it is not likely he would stoop so far as to play croquet," said Kate; "but I am only giving Mrs Mitford's message. You know it is not me that asks. I will tell her what you say."

"Tell her I am so sorry," said Mrs Huntley. "I know what it is to be disappointed when

one tries to get up any little thing impromptu, and the girls would have been so glad, and so would Willie—but she knows I cannot answer for Fred. Dr Mitford, I am so sorry Mr Huntley is not at home, nor my son. If they had known there was the least chance of seeing you ! But now you have come, you must have some tea.”

“I thank you, my dear madam,” said the Doctor, “but we have still a good way to go. I am taking Miss Crediton to see the Roman camp at Dulchester. It is not often I go so far, but you know I pretend to a little antiquarian knowledge——”

“Oh, a little indeed !” said Mrs Huntley ; “we all know what that means. You may be very proud, Kate, to have such a cicerone. I can’t tell you how I sigh for you, Doctor, when we have people down from town, and they go to see the camp. Oh, don’t ask me, I always beg of them—you should hear all about it if Dr Mitford were here.”

“Well, one has one’s little bits of information, of course,” said Dr Mitford, with a deprecating wave of the hand ; “one’s hobby,

I suppose the young people would call it. I am very glad that Frederick has got his fellowship. It must be a great satisfaction to his father and you."

"Well, we were pleased, of course," said the lady; "though, but for the honour of the thing, it did not matter to Fred. I often say how odd it is that such things should fall to him who don't want them, when so many poor fellows, to whom it would be a real blessing, fail. He has no business to have the money and the brains too."

"That must make it all the more agreeable," said the Doctor, with a stiff bow; and the looks of the two parents made Kate wonder suddenly whether John had been successful in his university career. Poor fellow! he did not look remarkably bright. There was no analogy between his looks and Fred Huntley's sharp clever face—but then he was some years younger than Fred.

"Won't you be persuaded to stay to dinner?" said Mrs Huntley; "you never can get back in time for your own. We have not seen Kate for ages, nor you either, Dr Mitford. Do stay

—my husband and all of them will be back before dinner. Mr Huntley will be so vexed and disappointed if I let you go.”

“But Dulchester, my dear lady,” said the Doctor, rising and making her a bow.

“Oh, Dulchester!—is your heart so much set upon it, Kate?”

Fortunately Kate glanced at her guide before she replied, and saw that he was red with mortification, anticipating her answer. “Oh dear, yes! my heart is set upon it,” she cried. “Dr Mitford has come all the way to make me understand; and, indeed, it is getting late, and we must not stop, even for tea.”

“I will go and see that the carriage is brought round,” said her old cavalier, with alacrity; and he shook hands with Mrs Huntley, who mimicked him as soon as his back was turned with a sweep of her hand and smirk of affability which tried Kate’s gravity much. “Oh, my dear, you don’t know what you are going to encounter,” she said, in a rapid undertone, as soon as he was gone. “I tried to save you from it, but you would not

back me up. He is the most dreadful old bore——”

“Hush! I am staying in his house, and they have been very, very kind,” said Kate, with a sudden blush.

“Staying in their house! I must speak to your papa about that, who never will let you come to us. But I did not know you knew the Mitfords, Kate.”

“We did not know them—but—my horse ran away with me—and Dr Mitford’s—son—saved my life.”

This Kate gave forth very slowly, with eyes that glittered with sudden excitement; and Mrs Huntley, for her part, received the news with the most eager interest.

“Oh, was it you?” she cried. “We heard something of it. They say it was quite a wonder that he didn’t lose his own life. But, dear me, Kate! after anything so interesting, how was it that he didn’t drive you himself instead of his papa?”

“I suppose, because he was never consulted,” said Kate, with some indignation; “and now I must not keep Dr Mitford waiting. Mrs

Mitford has been so good to me—oh, so kind ! She has nursed me as if I had been her own child ; and papa let me stay, he was so grateful to them. I don't know, I am sure, what the son did for me, but I know what the mother has done. She was as kind as if I had been her own child."

" Her own child ! " Mrs Huntley repeated to herself, with bewilderment, when Kate ran down-stairs ; " oh yes, indeed ! *that* one can easily understand. What a nice thing for John ! But I am sure I should never think of such a little flirt for one of my sons, however rich she was—a spoiled child ! "

This would have hurt Kate's feelings if she had heard it, for she thought she was a favourite of Mrs Huntley's—and so indeed she was ; but it is hard upon a woman to hear unmoved that somebody else's son has been braver, abler, more successful than her son, even though, as she reminded herself with a toss of her head, her boys had no need for that sort of thing, thank heaven ! " Fred shall go, if I can persuade him," she said within herself, " and spoil *that* John's game, though they

think so much of him ;” and yet there was not a shadow of a reason why Mrs Huntley should wish to thwart *that* John.

After this Kate had to do the camp, and did it with a heroic show of interest. She got through it, looking up into Dr Mitford’s face with such bright and vivid looks that the good man felt he had at last found a congenial soul. Kate bore this, and she bore the assaults of the unsteady hood, though it gave her yet another thump upon her bonnet, which nearly made an end of that ornament. But there are limits to human nature, and she was very glad when she found herself approaching home. She called the Rectory home with the frankest satisfaction, such as would have awakened many thoughts in Mrs Mitford’s mind. It was sweet to see the pretty irregular house in the evening light, with its shadow turned to the east and all its windows open, and the great sheaves of lilies sending forth their fragrance. John suddenly appeared to open the gate as they drove up, as if he had sprung from the earth ; and his mother was standing on the lawn with her white shawl thrown over her,

like another flower ; and the expedition was over, and the *castrum* done with, and Dr Mitford pleased, and the bonnet, perhaps, not spoiled for ever. Kate was so glad that she gave Mrs Mitford an unexpected kiss as she jumped lightly down. "How nice it is to have some one waiting for us !" she said, with almost tearful earnestness—the poor motherless girl ! Mrs Mitford was touched by the accent, and Kate was touched herself, though of course she must have known how much of her emotion was delight at being free of what she considered a bore. But it was not entirely relief either, and there was some real feeling in the girl's perverse little heart.

"I am so grieved they cannot come," said Mrs Mitford, when they were all seated at dinner, which had been delayed. "I am so sorry, my dear, for you ; but perhaps you might try a game with John—and the party could be asked for another day."

"I am so glad," said Kate. "It is so nice to escape the croquet-parties, and all the stuff one has to think about at home."

"But, my dear, you must miss your amuse-

ments," said Mrs Mitford. "I should not think a quiet life was the kind of life for you."

"Changes are what I like," said Kate, bravely. "I could not live always in a turmoil, and I could not live always in a hermitage. I should like sometimes the one and sometimes the other. The dreadful thing would be, to be always the same."

Mrs Mitford gave her son a piteous look, and then cast an instinctive glance round the room. She did not herself feel the full meaning that was in her eyes. She glanced at all the signs of her own changeless existence. For years and years she had visited the same places at the same hours, sat down to the same work, made the same engagements, discharged the same duties. The dinner-party, which, contrary to her own lights, she was going to give in honour of Kate, would have the same people at it as had been at her first dinner-party after her wedding. She said to herself that if John were rich he could give his wife a great deal more change; but still there remained the fact that John's wife would have

the parish to think of, and the schools, and the old women. It would not do, alas! it could not do, Mrs Mitford concluded, as she rose from dinner with a sigh. And yet it would be such a thing for John.

And to see poor John's miserable look when he came into the drawing-room, and found that Kate had a headache and had gone to bed. "It must have been that confounded camp," he said, through his teeth, which grieved his mother more.

"Oh, my dear, don't swear," she said; "things are bad enough without that."

"What things? and what do you mean, mother?" growled John.

"It is—that girl. I am so sorry she came here—so sorry you saved her, John; that she should come where no one wanted her, disturbing my boy!"

"Sorry I saved her! Are you mad, mother?" cried her son.

"Oh, you know I did not mean that. I am glad she is saved, poor thing—very glad; but oh, John, my dear, why should she come disturbing you? You must not think anything

more about her, my own boy. See what pains she takes to show you it is no use. She could not live where it is always the same! Oh, John, after so many warnings, if you fall into her wiles at last!"

"What folly!" he said, leaving her, and throwing himself on a sofa in a dark corner, where the light of the lamp did not reach him. The anxious mother could no longer see his face. It was not with her as in days past, when he would poke into the light, under the shade of the lamp, and put his book on the top of her work, getting many a tender scold for it, or read aloud to her, which was her greatest pleasure. The Doctor was in his study, busy with his paper for the Archæological Society, and as indifferent to his wife's loneliness as if she had been his housekeeper. Mrs Mitford had long ago got over that. She had accepted it as the natural course of affairs that your husband should go back to his study after dinner. Perhaps it would have plagued more than pleased her now had he suddenly made his appearance in the drawing-room. What she liked was to get her work or her

knitting (John's socks, which she always made with her own hands), and listen, in a soft rapture of ineffable content, as he read to her. It did not matter much what he read; his voice, and the work in her hand, and the consciousness that her boy was there, wrapt her in a silent atmosphere of happiness. But now how different it was! The Doctor by himself in his study, and Kate by herself in her chamber, and the mother and son, with almost the whole breadth of the room between them, each in a corner, he in the dark, she in the light, alone too. And it was all *that girl's* fault. It was she who was making him unhappy.

"John, won't you read to me a little, dear?" said his mother from the table.

"I can't to-night," he answered from the sofa, glad that his face was not visible. He was so vexed and disappointed and mortified, coming in full of the expectation of a long evening in Kate's society, and finding her gone. A year or two ago it would have brought tears to John's eyes. He was a man now, and it was not possible to cry, but he was so disappointed that he could scarcely

endure himself. Mrs Mitford bore his silence and abstraction as long as she could. It went to her heart—but she was all mother, down to the tips of her fingers; and though it gave her a deep wound to think her boy had thus given her over, she could not bear to see him unhappy. She laid down her work at last, and stole out of the room, wondering if he noticed her going, and went and knocked at Kate's door. "My dear, I have just made the tea, and it smells so refreshing. I thought, if you had not gone to bed, a cup would do you good," she said, coming in and taking Kate's hand. Her eyes were so wistful, such an unspoken prayer was in her face, that a glimmering of what she must mean just flashed upon Kate.

"How good of you to come and tell me! May Parsons go down and bring me a cup?" said the girl. She had been seated by the open window, with the breath of the lilies stealing up from the dark garden, and a reverie had stolen over her, about nothing in particular; only the soft night was in it, and the lilies, and the vague delights of youth. I

almost think she had felt John Mitford's incipient undeveloped sentiment breathing up to her in the vagueness and darkness, with an indefinite perfume, like the flowers. And Kate had no mind to leave this sweet confusion of dreams and odours and far-off suggestion, for actual talk and commonplace intercourse; and her first impulse was to get gently rid of her visitor, if that might be.

"It would lose all its fragrance coming upstairs," said Mrs Mitford. "You have not begun to undress, or even taken down your pretty hair; come down, my dear, for half an hour,—I know it will do your head good. You know, everybody says ours is such good tea."

"Don't I know it!" said Kate; "but——"

"But I can't take any refusal," said Mrs Mitford, drawing the girl's arm within her own. Oh, how little she wanted her at that moment, had the truth been known! and yet she coaxed and wooed her as if it were a personal grace. And the girl yielded, thinking more a great deal of the sweetness of being thus sought and coaxed by the mother, than

of the son who was sitting in the dumps on the sofa in the dark corner down-stairs.

"If *you* want me," she said, with a faint accent of inquiry, and gave Mrs Mitford a soft little kiss. "I think mamma must have been like you," she said in apology, a remark which confused John's mother, and made her feel guilty. For it was not kindness to this motherless creature that moved her, but the maternal passion which paused at nothing which could give pleasure to her boy.

John was standing in the open window hesitating whether he should plunge out into the darkness, when he heard the voices of the two ladies coming down-stairs, and all the room immediately filled with radiance and splendour. In a moment he was back again, standing, hovering over Kate, who sank into an easy-chair close to the light, and gave herself up to the delights of the promised cup of tea. He did not say a dozen words to her all the rest of the evening, but he was happy; and she lying back at her ease, with the consciousness of an admiring audience, chattered and sipped, and was happy too. It did not occur to Kate that every word

she said was being closely criticised by the woman who had gone to seek her, who was basking in the pleasant rays of her youth, and smiling at all her nonsense and chatter, and looking so wistfully at her by times. She thought she had made a conquest of Mrs Mitford *too*, and was pleased and proud. "I cannot be just a little flirt and a stupid," Kate was saying to herself, "for Mrs Mitford is fond of me *too*." And with this pleasant sense of having an utterly indulgent audience, she rattled on more freely than she had ever before found it possible to do at Fanshawe. And Mrs Mitford made secret notes of all the nonsense, and laid up in her memory everything that was said. And then the Doctor came in from his study, and the bell was rung, and the servants appeared dimly, and sat down in a row against the further wall where it was dark; and they had prayers. Mrs Mitford was scrupulous about having a shade over the lamp—she thought it was good for the eyes—so that there was one brilliant spot round the table, and all the rest was dim and vague, darkness deepening into the corners, and in-

tensifying to a centre in the great window full of night, the open abyss into the garden all sweet with roses and lilies, through which there puffed by times a breath of summer wind. Now that the tea-things were removed, it was Dr Mitford's white head, and his open book, and the whiter hand which was laid upon it, that were the foremost objects in the room; and in the middle distance among the shadows was Mrs Mitford; and at the back, like ghosts, the maids and the man. Kate joined very devoutly in the prayers, and felt glad she had come down-stairs. "How good they are, how quiet it is, how nice to have prayers! and oh, what sweetness in the air!" she said to herself, when she ought to have been praying. It was novel to her, and the composition of the picture was so pretty. And they were all so kind—fond of her, indeed. Kate went back to her room, when all was over, with a soft complacency and satisfaction with herself possessing her heart.

CHAPTER VII.

THE next afternoon John and Kate were on the lawn, with Mrs Mitford sitting by, when Fred Huntley suddenly rode in at the gate. The two young people had no particular inclination for croquet, but the lawn had been mowed, and Mrs Mitford had given up her schools for one day, and seated herself outside the drawing-room window to countenance their intercourse. She did not take any part in their talk, but knitted with as much placidity as she could command, having reasoned with herself all the night through, and finally made up her mind that it would be better for her to take no part, but let things take their course. "If I try to influence her, she will think I have interested motives; and if I try to influence him, my boy will turn against me,"

she had said to herself piteously, shedding a few silent tears under cover of the night; and her decision had been, that she would only stand by and look on, that was all. For the first time in his life John's mother felt herself incapable of helping, or guiding, or being of any service to her boy. She had to see him face the danger, and say nothing—the danger on one hand of being secularised, and his heart turned to frivolity; and on the other, of having that heart broken. Which was the worse his mother could scarcely tell.

So these two were trifling, each with a mallet, and talking, and getting more and more interested in each other, when Fred Huntley, as I have said, rode suddenly in upon them. He gave a very keen knowing glance at the two on the lawn, as he passed them to pay his respects to Mrs Mitford. Was it her doing? was it their own doing? Fred caught the secret of the situation as a well-trained man of the world would naturally do. He had first a natural impulse to interfere; and then he paused and stopped himself, and declared to himself that he would not spoil sport. He was

a man to whom generous thoughts came not, as is natural, by impulse, but upon thought. And after all, why should he meddle with them? If she married John, it would be a good thing for John, and, most likely, for her too—and why should I interfere? said Fred, without a doubt of his capability to do so; so he went and talked to Mrs Mitford, while the two on the lawn pursued their languid sport. “I hate him,” Kate had said on his arrival; “let us pretend we have begun a game;” and John was but too happy—too much delighted, by the suggestion. So they kept the lawn to themselves, and trifled and talked, while Fred chatted with the chaperone over her knitting. He had come to make the apologies of his family, expecting to find an assemblage of ladies with John in the midst, the one island of black among clouds of muslin. The ladies in Fanshawe Regis were not even young, and consequently it was a relief to him to see one pretty figure only, and the mother sitting by; and he did his best to make himself agreeable, having, as it happened, a more interesting subject than “*le beau temps et la pluie.*”

"I hear John has been distinguishing himself," he said ; and though he did not in the least intend it, there was something in his tone which made Mrs Mitford flush red to the edge of her hair, and raise herself stiffly on her seat. The truth was, John had been in competition with Fred more than once at college, and had not been held to have distinguished himself—which naturally drove his mother to arms at the first word.

"Not anything particular that I am aware of," she said, drawing herself up stiffly ; "he always is the best son and the kindest heart in the world."

"But about Miss Crediton," said Fred.

"Oh, that was a mere accident," said John's mother. "You see he can't help having a warm heart, and being so big and strong."

Fred was fully three inches shorter than John, and in this way at least he had never distinguished himself. "To be sure, that is an easy way of accounting for it," he said, with much command of temper. "It must be very nice to be big and strong, especially when pretty girls and heiresses are in danger in one's way."

“Is she an heiress?” said Mrs Mitford, with the most innocent face in the world.

“Well, rather,” said Fred; and here the little passage of arms came to a close. “My sisters were very sorry they could not come,” he went on after an interval, during which he had been intently watching the two figures on the lawn. “They sent all kinds of messages, but I fear I have lost them on the way. They could scarcely have been more sorry had it been a dance—and what could a young lady say more?”

“I wish they could have come,” said Mrs Mitford; and just then Lizzie came and whispered something in her ear. “Will you excuse me for two minutes, Mr Huntley? It is one of my poor people. I am so sorry to be rude, and go away.”

Fred said something that was very polite, and went slowly towards the croquet-players as she left him. He thought Kate was very pretty—he had never seen her look so pretty. She was dressed in fresh muslin all but white, with her favourite blue ribbons, and looked so dainty, so refined, such a little princess beside

John's somewhat heavy large figure. Not but what he looked a gentleman too—but a rural gentleman, a heavy weight, and standing side by side with a creature made of sunshine and light. Fred Huntley had never admired Kate particularly heretofore, but he did that day, and wondered at himself. He sauntered up to them, watching their looks and movements, and stood by and criticised their play. "Miss Crediton, you have it all in your own hands," he said. "He has not the heart to hit your ball. You have nothing to do but go in and win. My good fellow, I never saw such bad play!"

"As if one cared for winning!" said Kate, dragging her mallet along the grass. "What do we all play croquet for, I wonder?" And she gave vent to her feelings in a delicate yawn, and sank into the chair which John had brought out for her. He had placed it under the shadow of a graceful acacia, which kept dropping its white blossoms at her feet, and the two young men drew near and looked at her. Fred was much the more ready of the two, so far as talk was concerned.

“That is a tremendous question,” he said. “It is as bad as if you had invited us to clear up the origin of evil. But there is nobody like women for going to the bottom of things. We do it because somebody once considered it pleasant, I suppose.”

“Or because we are believed to have nothing else to do,” said John.

“Then why can’t we be permitted to do nothing? It tires me to death standing about in the sun,” said Kate, in a plaintive voice. “I’d rather lean back and be comfortable, and listen to the leaves. I’d rather even have you two sit down here in the shade,” and she waved her hand like a little princess towards the turf on each side of her, “and quarrel about something—so long as you did not come to blows. Talk—oh, please, talk about something women are not supposed to understand!”

“By all means,” said Fred, throwing himself down at her feet; “what shall it be? Sophocles, or steam-engines, or the Darwinian theory? Mitford is up in everything, I know, and one has a few vague ideas on general subjects—which shall it be?”

But John said nothing. He stood bending towards her with that great, tall, somewhat heavy figure of his. He had been talking not unagreeably so long as the two were alone, but Fred's interposition quenched him. He stood with an inexpressible something in his look and attitude, which said, "I am here to watch over you, to serve you, not to take my ease and talk nonsense in your presence," which brought a little colour to Kate's cheeks. She looked at the young men in her turn, involuntarily contrasting the ease of the man of the world with the almost awkwardness of the other. Under such circumstances one knows what the verdict of a frivolous girl would naturally be. One of them could enter into all her habitual chatter, and give her all her nonsense back. He was handsomer than John Mitford, though neither was an Adonis. He was more successful; he had the *prestige* about him of a man of intellect, and yet he was just like other people. Whereas John, without the *prestige*, was unlike other people. Kate looked at them with a curious impression on her mind, as if she were making that grand

decision which the heroes of olden time used to be called upon to make between the true and the false—between Pleasure and Goodness. A slight shiver went over her, she could not tell why. Neither of them was asking anything of her at that moment. As for Fred Huntley, he had never shown the slightest inclination to ask anything of her, and yet in some mysterious way she felt as if she were deciding her fate.

“You are cold—let me go and bring you a shawl,” said John.

“Oh, it is nothing. It is because I have been ill. I never was so stupid in all my life before. Thanks, Mr Mitford, that is so nice,” said Kate. But she was not cold, though she accepted the shawl he brought her. She was trembling before her fate. And it was John to whom some unseen counsellor seemed to direct her. It was John she liked best, she said to herself. His was the good face, the tender eyes, the loyal soul. Why such a crisis should come upon her in the middle of a game at croquet, Kate could not imagine; nor why her innocent intention of

bewildering poor John's being for him, and giving a sharp tug at his heart-strings by way of diversion, should have changed all at once into this sudden compulsion of fate upon herself to choose or to reject. Such nonsense! when nobody was asking her—nobody thinking of such a thing! She got out of it precipitately, with the haste of fear, not knowing or caring what nonsense she spoke. "You make me so uncomfortable when you stand like that," she cried. "Sit down, as Mr Huntley has done. There are only us three, and why should we make martyrs of ourselves? and when Mrs Mitford comes back, you can go and bring her chair under this tree. Mr Huntley, are you going to the ball at the Castle when the young Earl comes of age?"

"I had not heard anything about it," said Fred. "I don't care for balls in a general way; but if you are to be there, Miss Crediton——"

"Of course you will go," said Kate; "oh, I understand that. I wish you gentlemen would now and then say something a little original. Mr Mitford, I suppose I must not ask if you

are going, or you will answer me the same?"

"No, I don't think there is any chance that I shall go," he said, with a smile, "not even if you are there."

"That is not original," said Fred, "it is only ringing the changes. But I suppose you will be going up to the bishop then, Mitford, eh? When is it? You ought not to speak to him about balls, and tempt him, Miss Crediton, at this moment of his life."

Kate started a little in spite of herself. "Is it so near as that? Oh, Mr Mitford, is it true?"

"Quite true," John answered, facing her, with a certain faltering steadiness which she found it hard to understand; "but I don't think the temptation of balls, so far as that goes, is likely to do me much harm."

"And I hope you are all right in other respects, old fellow," said Fred Huntley, suddenly, in an undertone. You are not going to do anything that will make you uncomfortable, I hope. You are not going to make any sacrifice of—of opinion—of—— I remember the talks we used to have long ago."

"I am not going to sacrifice my conscience, if that is what you mean," said John, shortly, growing very red; "but this is not the moment for such a discussion."

"I wonder where Mrs Mitford can be for so long," cried Kate, rushing into the conversation; "it must be some of her poor people. I think, as the croquet has been a failure, I shall go and see; but in the mean time, Mr Huntley, tell me what the girls are about, and where they are going. Are they to pay as many visits this year as they did last? or are you going to have your house full of people? Papa has asked some hundreds to Fernwood, I believe. I hate autumn and the shooting, and all the people that come from town. Why should the poor partridges lose their lives and we our tempers every year, as soon as September comes? It is very hard upon us both. Or else you all go off to the grouse, and then there is not a man left in the place to fill a corner at dinner. What harm have those poor birds ever done to you?"

"They are very nice to eat," said Fred, "and I suppose if we did not kill them they'd kill us in time. But, Miss Crediton, you are too philo-

sophical. May not a man play croquet or shoot partridges without rendering a reason? One does so many things without any reason at all."

"Well," said Kate, smothering another yawn, "if you will not say anything that is amusing, or argue, or do anything I tell you, I shall go and look for Mrs Mitford. I don't think it is quite proper to sit here by myself and talk to two gentlemen, especially as you let me do almost all the talking. And it is hot out of doors. I will go in till tea is ready; but, Mr John, you do not need to trouble yourself. There is not even a door to open. I shall go in at the window. Pray don't come," she added, in a lower tone, as he followed her across the lawn; "go and talk to *him*."

"I would much rather attend upon you, even though you don't want me," said John, with a half-audible sigh.

"But I do want you," said Kate, touched by his tone, "you are always so good to me; and I can't bear *him*, with his chatter and talk. Do keep him away as long as you can—until we call you in to tea."

And then she gave the poor fellow a little

nod of friendship, and a smile which dazzled him. He went away strengthened in his soul to be more than civil to Fred Huntley—poor Fred, upon whom this sunshine had not fallen—whom, indeed, she was inclined to avert her countenance from. He strolled about the garden with that unfortunate but unconscious being for half an hour, and then took him to see the church, which was a fine one, wondering in himself all the time when that summons would come to tea. Huntley seemed abstracted too, and it came natural to John to think that everybody must be moved as he himself was, and that it was absence from *her* which made a cloud over his visitor. Their conversation strayed to a hundred other subjects as they strolled gravely up and down. They talked of the doings in Parliament, of the newspapers, of the county member, of the nature of the county architecture, of the difference in point of age between the chancel and the nave of Fanshawe Regis church, which was a question much discussed in antiquarian circles; but it was not until a full hour had elapsed that anything was said of Kate. At last,—

“By the by,” said Huntley, “what was that accident that happened to Miss Crediton? One hears different accounts of it all over the country, and she does not seem to know very well herself.”

“It was not much,” said John, with rising colour. “Her horse ran away with her—he was making for the cliff, you know, at Winton, that overhangs the river—I beg your pardon, but the thought makes me sick—and I stopped him—that’s all.”

“But how did you stop him?”

“It does not greatly matter,” said John; “I did somehow. I don’t know much more about it than she does. And don’t speak of it to her, for heaven’s sake! She does not know what an awful danger she escaped.”

“But surely she knows what happened?” said Fred.

“Oh yes — she knows, and she does not know. I tell you I don’t know myself. Don’t say anything more about it, please.”

“That is all very well, my dear fellow,” said Huntley; “but Kate Crediton is an heiress, and a very nice girl; and if you were to go in

for her, I can tell you it would be a very good thing for you."

This time John grew pale—so pale that the keen observer by his side was filled with sudden consternation, and could not make it out. "Suppose, in the mean time, we go in to tea," he said, with a curious sternness. Not another word was said, for Huntley was too much a man of the world to repeat an unpalatable piece of advice; but he was rather relieved, on the whole, when the ceremonial was over, the tea swallowed, and half an hour of talk in the drawing-room added on to the talk on the lawn. "I should like to know what *she* means by it," Fred said to himself, indignantly, as he rode home to dinner. John Mitford was a simpleton, an innocent, an ass, if you please; but Kate knew what was what, and must have some idea where she was drifting. And what could she mean, did anybody know?

She herself did not know, at least. She was very good to John all that evening, asking him questions about his Oxford life, and humouring him in a hundred little ways, of which he himself was but half conscious. And after dinner

it so happened that they were left in the garden together, for Mrs Mitford had relaxed a little in the sternness of the chaperone's duties, which were new to her, and began to forget that the boy and the girl were each other's natural enemies. It was a lovely night, and Kate lingered and walked round and round the old house till she was compelled at last to acknowledge herself tired. And John, well pleased, gave her his arm ; and it was only when she had accepted that support, and had him at a vantage, that she put the question she had been meditating. The soft air enclosed them round and round, and the soft darkness, and all the delicate odours and insensible sounds of night. He could scarcely see her, and yet she was leaning on him with her face raised and his bent, each toward the other. Then it was, with just a little pressure of his arm to give emphasis to her question, that she opened her batteries upon him at one *coup*.

"Is it really true," she said, with a certain supplication in her voice, "that you are determined to be a clergyman, Mr John?"

"True!" he said, staggering under it as he

received the blow, and in his confusion not knowing what to say.

“Yes, true. Will you tell me? I should so very much like to know.”

And then John's heart stood still for one painful moment. The question was so easy to ask, and the answer was not so easy. He drew his breath like a man drowning, before he could muster strength to reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

“MISS CREDITON,” said John Mitford, drawing a long breath, “you don’t know what a very serious question that is; it has been my burden for half my life. I have never spoken of it to any one, and you have taken me a little by surprise. I should like to tell you all about it, but you—would not care to hear.”

“Indeed I should,” said Kate, eagerly. “Oh, I do so hope you have not quite made up your mind. It would be such a sacrifice. Fanshawe Regis is very nice—but to be buried here all your life, and never to take part in anything, nor to have any way of rising in the world, or improving your position! If I were a man, I would rather be anything than a clergyman. It is like making a ghost of yourself at the beginning of your life.”

“A ghost of myself?” said John.

“Yes—of course it just comes to that; other men will go on and on while you remain behind,” cried Kate. “I could not bear it. *That* Fred Huntley, for example—he is reading for the bar, I believe, and he is clever, and he will be Lord Chancellor, or something, while you are only Rector of Fanshawe Regis. *That* is what I could not bear.”

John shook his head with a feeling that she did not understand him; and yet was attracted, not repelled. “That is not my feeling,” he said. “I don’t think you would think so either if you looked into it more. Huntley has more brains than I have; he will always rise higher if he takes the trouble—but I don’t care for that. The thing is—but, Miss Crediton, it would bore you to listen to such a long story; suppose we go in to my mother—she knows nothing about my vain thoughts, thank heaven!”

“Oh no, no,” said Kate, clinging still closer to his arm; “tell me everything—I shall not be bored. That is, if you will—if you don’t mind trusting me.”

“Trusting you!” It was curious how much more impressive his voice was, coming out of the darkness. His awkwardness, his diffidence, everything that made him look commonplace in the daylight, had disappeared. Kate felt a little thrill, half of excitement, half of pride. Yes, he would trust her, though nobody else (he said) in all the world. It was not John that thus moved her; it was the sense of being the one selected and chosen—one out of a hundred—one out of the world—which is the sweetest flattery which can be addressed to man or woman. She looked up to him, though he could not see her, raising that face which John already felt was the sweetest in the world. And he bent over her, and her little hand trembled on his arm, and the darkness wrapped them round and round, so that they could not see each other’s faces—the very moment and the very circumstances which make it sweet to confide and to be confided in. It was not yet ten days since he had seen her first, and she had not as yet shown the least trace of a character likely to understand his, and yet he was ready to trust her with the deepest secrets of his heart.

"It is not that," said John. "I am sure you are not the one to bid a man forsake his duty that he might rise in the world. If I were as sure about everything I ought to believe as—as my father is, I should go into the Church joyfully to-morrow."

"Should you?" said Kate, feeling chilled in spite of herself.

"I should; and you would approve me for doing so, I know," he said, earnestly. "But don't think me worse than I am, Miss Crediton. I am not a sceptic nor an infidel, that you should draw away from me. Yes, you did, ever so little—but if it had only been a hair-breadth, I should have felt it. It is not so much that I doubt—but I can't feel sure of things. My father is sure of everything; that is the superiority of the older generations. They knew what they believed, and so they were ready to go to the stake for it——"

"Or send other people to the stake," said Kate. The conversation was getting so dreadfully serious that she turned it where she could to the side of laughter; but it was not possible in this case.

“Yes, I know,” he said, softly, altogether ignoring her lighter tone; “the one thing implies the other. I acknowledge it does; we are such confused creatures. But as for me, I could neither die for my belief nor make any one else die. I don’t feel sure. I say to myself, how do you know he is wrong and you are right? How do I know? But you see my father knows; and most of the old people in the village are just as certain as he. Is it because we are young, I wonder?” said John.

“Oh, don’t speak like that—pray don’t. Why should it be because we are young?”

“That I can’t tell,” said John, in the darkness. “It might be out of opposition, perhaps, because they are so sure—so sure—cruelly sure, I often think. But when a man has to teach others, I suppose that is how he ought to be; and my very soul shrinks, Miss Crediton——”

“Yes?”

“You will not say anything to my mother? She has brought me up for it, and set her heart on it, and I would not fail her for the world.”

“But, Mr John,” said Kate, “I don’t under-

stand ; if you are not a—I mean, if you don't believe—the Bible—should you be a clergyman for any other reason ? Indeed I don't understand."

"No," he said, vehemently ; "you are right and I am wrong. I ought not, I know. But then I am not sure that I don't believe. I think I do. I believe men must be taught to serve God. I believe that He comforts them in their distress. You are too true, too straightforward, too innocent to know. I believe and I don't believe. But the thing is, how can I teach, how can I pronounce with authority, not being sure ?—that is what stops me."

Kate stopped too, being perplexed. "I don't like the thought of your being a clergyman," she said, with what would have been, could he have seen it, a pleading look up into his face.

And then a long sigh came from John's breast. She heard that, but she did not know that he shook his head as well ; and in her ignorance she went on.

"It would be so much better for you to do anything else. Of course, if you had had a

very strong disposition for it—but when you have not. And you would do so very much better for yourself. If you were to give it up——”

“Give it up!” cried John; “the only work that is worth doing on earth!”

“But, good heavens! Mr Mitford, what do you mean? for I don’t understand you. If it is the only work worth doing on earth, why do you persuade people you don’t mean to do it? I don’t understand.”

“Where is there any other work worth doing?” said John. “I don’t want to be a soldier, which might mean something. Could I be a doctor, pretending to know how to cure people of their illnesses—or a lawyer, taking any side he is paid for? No, that is the only work worth doing: to devote one’s whole life to the service of men—to save them, mend them, bring them from the devil to God. Where is there any such work? And yet I pause here on the threshold, all for a defect of nature. I know you are despising me in your heart.”

“No, no,” said Kate, quite bewildered. She

did not despise him ; on the contrary, it just gleamed across her mind that here was something she had no comprehension of—something she had never met with before. “Mr John, it is you who will think me very stupid. But I don’t understand you,” she said, with a certain humility. The answer he made was involuntary. He had no right to do it on such short acquaintance—a mere stranger, you might say. He pressed to his side with unconscious tenderness the hand that rested on his arm.

“You don’t understand such pitiful weakness,” he said. “You would see what was right and do it, without lingering and hesitating. I know you would. Don’t be angry with me. We two are nearer each other than anybody else can be—are not we? We were very near for one moment, like one life ; and we might have died so—together. That should make us very close—very close—friends.”

“Oh, Mr John !”

“Don’t cry. I should not have reminded you,” he said, with sudden compunction. “I

am so selfish ; but you said you felt as if—I belonged to you. So I do—to be your servant—your—anything you please. And that is why I tell you all this weakness of mine, because it was just a chance that we did not die in a moment—together. Oh, hush, hush ! I said it to rouse myself, and because it was so sweet. I forgot it must be terrible to you.”

“I—I understand,” said Kate, with a sob. “It makes us like—brother and sister. But I never can do anything like that for you. I can only help you with—a little sympathy ; but you shall always have that—as if you were—my brother. Oh, never doubt it. I am glad you have told me—I shall know you better now.”

“And here I have gone and made her cry like a selfish beast,” said John. “Just one more walk round—and lean heavier on me : and I will not say another word to vex you—not one.”

“I am not vexed,” said Kate, with a soft little smile among her tears, which somehow diffused itself into the darkness, one could not

tell how. He felt it warm him and brighten him, though he could not see it; and thus they made one silent round, pausing for a moment where the lilies stood up in that tall pillar, glimmering through the night and breathing out sweetness. John, whose heart was full of all unspeakable things, came to a moment's pause before them, though he was faithful to his promise, and did not speak. Some angel seemed to be by, saying *Ave*, as in that scene which the old painters always adorn with the stately flower of Mary. John believed all the poets had said of women at that moment, in the sweetness of the summer dark. Hail, woman, full of grace! The whole air was full of angelic salutation. But it was he, the man, who had the privilege of supporting her, of protecting her, of saving her in danger. Thus the young man raved, with his heart full. And Kate in the silence, leaning on his arm, dried her tears, and trembled with a strange mixture of courage and perplexity and emotion. And then she wondered what Mrs Mitford would say.

Mrs Mitford said nothing when the two

came in by the open window, with eyes dazzled by the sudden entrance into the light. Kate's eyes were more dazzling than the lamp, if anybody had looked at them. The tears were dry, but they had left a humid radiance behind, and the fresh night air had ruffled the gold in her hair, and heightened the colour on her cheeks, which betrayed the commotion within. Mrs Mitford made no special remark, except that she feared the tea was cold, and that she had just been about to ring to have it taken away. "You must have tired her wandering so long about the garden. You should not be thoughtless, John," said his mother; "and it is almost time for prayers."

"It was my fault," said Kate; "it was so pleasant out of doors, and quiet, and sweet. I am sorry we have kept you waiting. I did not know it was so late."

"Oh, my dear, I do not mind," said Mrs Mitford, smothering a half-sigh; for, to be sure, she had been alone all the time while they were wandering among the lilies; and she was not used to it—yet. "But Dr Mitford is very particular about the hour for

prayers, and you must make haste, like a good child, with your tea. I never like to put him out."

"Oh, not for the world!" cried Kate; and she swallowed the cold tea very hurriedly, and went for Dr Mitford's books, and arranged them on the table with her own hands; and then she came softly behind John's mother, and gave her a kiss, as light as if a rose-leaf had blown against her cheek. She did not offer any explanation of this sudden caress, but seated herself close by Mrs Mitford, and clasped her hands in her lap like a young lady in a picture of family devotion; and then Dr Mitford's boots were heard to creak along the long passage which led from his study, and the bell was rung for prayers.

This conversation gave Kate a great deal to think about when she went up-stairs. John's appeal to her had gone honestly to her heart. She was touched by it in quite a different way from what she would have been had he been making love. "Yes, indeed, we do belong to each other—he saved my life," she said to herself; "we ought always to be like—brother—

and sister." When she said it, she felt in her heart of hearts that this did not quite state the case; but let it be, to save trouble. And then she tried to reflect upon the confession he had made to her. But that was more difficult. Kate was far better acquainted with ordinary life than John. She would have behaved like an accomplished woman of the world in an emergency which would have turned him at once into a heavy student or awkward country lad; but in other matters she was a baby beside him. She had never thought at all on the subjects which had occupied his mind for years. And she was thunder-struck by his hesitation. Could it be that people out of books really thought and felt so? Could it be? She was so perplexed that she could not draw herself out of the maze. She reflected with all her might upon what she ought to do and say to him; but could not by any means master his difficulty. He must either decide to be a clergyman or not to be a clergyman—that was the distinct issue; and if he could, by any sort of pressure put upon him, be made to give up the notion, that would be

so much the better. Going into the Church because he had been brought up to it, and because his friends desired it, was a motive perfectly comprehensible to Kate. But then had not she, whatever might come of it, stolen into his confidence closer than any of his friends? and it was his own life he had to decide upon; and, in the course of nature, he must after a while detach himself from his father and mother, and live according to his own judgment, not by theirs. If she could move him (being, as he said, so close to him) to choose a manner of life which would be far better for him than the Church, would not that be exercising her influence in the most satisfactory way? As for the deeper question, it puzzled her so much, that after one or two efforts she gave it up. The progress of advanced opinions has been sufficiently great to render it impossible even for a fashionable young lady not to be aware of the existence of "doubts;" but what did he mean by turning round upon her in that incomprehensible way, and talking of "the only work worth doing," just after he had taken refuge in that sanc-

tuary of uncertainty which every man, if he likes, has a right to shelter himself in? To have doubts was comprehensible, too; but to have doubts and yet to think a clergyman's work the only work worth doing! Kate's only refuge was to allow to herself that he was a strange, a very strange fellow; was he a little—cracked?—was he trying to bewilder her? “Anyhow, he is nice,” Kate said to herself; and that covered a multitude of sins.

Meanwhile John, poor fellow, went out after they had all gone up-stairs, and had a long walk by himself in the night, to tone himself down a little from the exaltation of the moment in which he had told her that he and she had almost died together. There was the strangest subtle sweetness to himself in the thought. To have actually died with her, and for her, seemed to him, in his foolishness, as if it would have been so sweet. And then he felt that he had opened his heart to her, and that she knew all his thoughts. He had told them to her in all their inconsistency, in all their confusion, and she had understood. So he thought. He went out in the fervour of his

youth through the darkling paths, and brushed along the hedges, all crisp with dew, and said to himself that henceforth one creature at least in the world knew what he meant. His feelings were such as have not been rare in England for half a century back. He had been trained, as it were, in the bosom of the Church, and natural filial reverence, and use and wont, had blinded him to the very commonplace character of its labours as fulfilled by his father. His father was—his father; a privileged being, whose actions had not yet come within the range of things to be discussed. And the young man's mind was full of the vague enthusiasm and exaltation which belong to his age. Ideally, was not the work of a Christian priest the only work in the world? A life devoted to the help and salvation of one's fellow-creatures for here and for hereafter—no enterprise could be so noble, none so important. And must he relinquish that, because he felt it difficult to pronounce with authority, "without doubt he shall perish everlastingly"? Must he give up the only purely disinterested labour which man can

perform for man—the art of winning souls, of ameliorating the earth, of cleansing its hidden corners, and brightening its melancholy face? No, he could not give it up; and yet, on the other hand, how could he utter certain words, how make certain confessions, how take up that for his faith which was not his faith? John's heart had been wrung in many a melancholy hour of musing with this struggle, which was so very different from Kate's conception of his difficulties. But now there stole into the conflict a certain sweetness—it was, that he was understood. Some one stood by him now, silently backing him, silently following him up,—perhaps with a shy hand on his arm; perhaps—who could tell?—with a shy hand in his, ere long. It did not give him any help in resolving his grand problem, but it was astonishing how it sweetened it. He walked on and on, not knowing how far he went, with a strange sense that life was changed—that he was another man. It seemed as if new light must come to him after this sudden enhancement of life and vigour. Was it true that there were two now

to struggle instead of one? John was not far enough gone to put such a question definitely in words to himself, but it lingered about the avenues of his mind, and sweet whispers of response seemed to breathe over him. Two, and not one! and he was understood, and his difficulties appreciated; and surely now the guiding light at last must come.

His mother heard him come in, as she lay awake thinking of him, and wondered why he should go out so late, and whether he had shut the door, and thanked heaven his father was fast asleep, and did not hear him; for Dr Mitford would have become alarmed had he heard of such nocturnal walks—first, for John's morals, lest he should have found some unlawful attraction in the village; and, second, for the plate, if the house was known to be deprived of one of its defenders. His anxious mother, though she had thought of little else since his birth except John's ways and thoughts, had yet no inkling of anything deeper that might be in his mind. That he might love Kate, and that Kate might play with him as a cat plays with a mouse—en-

courage him for her own amusement while she stayed at Fanshawe Regis, and throw him off as soon as she left—that was Mrs Mitford's only fear respecting him. It was so painful that it kept her from sleeping. She could not bear to think of any one so wounding, so misappreciating, her boy. If she but knew him as I know him, she would go down on her knees and thank God for such a man's love, she said to herself in the darkness, drying her soft eyes. But how was his mother—a witness whose impartiality nobody would believe in—to persuade the girl of this? And Mrs Mitford was a true woman, and ranked a “disappointment” at a very high rate among the afflictions of men. And it was very, very grievous to her to think of this little coquette trifling with her son, and giving the poor boy a heartbreak. She was nearly tempted half-a-dozen times to get up and throw her dressing-gown about her, and make her way through the slumbering house, and through the ghostly moonlight which fell broadly in from the staircase-window upon the corridor, to Kate's room, to rouse her out of her sleep,

and shake her, and say, "Oh you careless, foolish, naughty little Kate! You will never get the chance of such another, if you break my boy's heart." It would have been very, very foolish of her had she done so; and yet that was the impulse in her mind. But it never occurred to Mrs Mitford that when he took that long, silent, dreary walk, he might be thinking of something else of even more importance than Kate's acceptance or refusal. She had watched him all his life, day by day and hour by hour, and yet she had never realised such a possibility. So she lay thinking of him, and wondering when he would come back, and heard afar off the first faint touch of his foot on the path, and felt her heart beat with satisfaction, and hoped he would lock the door; but never dreamed that his long wandering out in the dark could have any motive or object except the first love which filled his heart with restlessness, and all a young man's passionate fears and hopes. Thank heaven! his father slept always as sound as a top, and could not hear.

Poor Mrs Mitford! how bitter it would

have been to her could she have realised that Kate was lying awake also, and heard him come in, and knew what he was thinking of better than his mother did ! “ Poor boy ! ” Kate murmured to herself, between asleep and awake, as she heard his step ; “ I must speak to him *seriously* to-morrow.” There was a certain self-importance in the thought ; for it is pleasant to be the depositary of such confidences, and to know you have been chosen out of all the world to have the secret of a life confided to you. The difference was that Kate, after this little speech to herself, fell very fast asleep, and remembered very little about it when she woke in the morning. But Mrs Mitford’s mind was so full that she could neither give up the subject nor go to sleep. As for the Doctor, good man, he heard nothing and thought of nothing, and had never awakened to the fact that John was likely to bring any disturbance whatever into his life. Why should anything happen to him more than to other people ? Dr Mitford would have said ; and even the love-story would not have excited him. Thus the son of

the house stole in, in the darkness, with his candle in his hand, through the shut-up silent dwelling, passing softly by his mother's door not to wake her, with the fresh air still blowing in his face, and the whirl of feeling within, uncalmed even by fatigue and the exertion he had been making. And the two women waked and listened, opening their eyes in the dark that they might hear the better :—a very, very usual domestic scene ; but the men who are thus watched and listened for are seldom such innocent men as John.

CHAPTER IX.

SOME time passed after this eventful evening before Kate had any opportunity of making the assault upon John's principles which she proposed to herself. There were some days of tranquil peaceful country life, spent in doing nothing particular—in little walks taken under the mother's eye—in an expedition to St Biddulph's, the whole little party together, in which, though Dr Mitford took the office of cicerone for Kate's benefit, there was more of John than of his father. This kind of intercourse which threw them continually together, yet never left them alone to undergo the temptation of saying too much, promoted the intimacy of the two young people in the most wonderful way. They were each other's natural companions, each

other's most lively sympathisers. The father and the mother stood on a different altitude, were looked up to, respected perhaps, perhaps softly smiled at in the expression of their antiquated opinions ; but the young man and the young woman were on the same level, and understood each other. As for poor John, he gave himself up absolutely to the spell. He had never been so long in the society of any young woman before ; his imagination had not been frittered away by any preludes of fancy. He fell in love all at once, with all his heart and strength and mind. It was his first great emotion, and it took him not at the callow age, but when his mind (he thought) was matured, and his being had reached its full strength. He was in reality four-and-twenty, but he had felt fifty in the gravity of his thoughts ; and, with all the force of his serious nature, he plunged into the extraordinary new life which opened like a garden of Paradise before him. It was all a blaze of light and splendour to his eyes. The world he had thought a sombre place enough before, full of painful demands upon his patience, his powers

of self-renunciation, and capacity of self-control. But now all at once it had changed to Eden. And Kate, of whom he knew so little, was the cause.

She, too, was falling under this natural fascination. She was very much interested in him, she said to herself. It was so sad to see such a man, so full of talent and capability, immolate himself like this. Kate felt as if she would have done a great deal to save him. She represented to herself that, if he had felt a special vocation for the Church, she would have passed on her way and said nothing, as became a recent acquaintance; but when he was not happy! Was it not her duty, in gratitude to her preserver, to interfere according to her ability, and deliver him from temptation? Yes! she concluded it was her duty with a certain enthusiasm; and even, if that was necessary, that she would be willing to do something to save him. She would make an exertion in his behalf, if there was anything she could do. She did not, even to herself explain what was the anything she could do to influence John one way or

another. Such details it is perhaps better to leave in darkness. But she felt herself ready to exert herself in her turn—to make an effort—what, indeed, if it were a sacrifice?—to preserve him as he had preserved her.

It was only on what was to be the day before her departure that Kate found the necessary opportunity. About a mile from Fanshawe Regis was a river which had been John's joy all his life; and on Kate's last day, he was to be permitted the delight of introducing her to its pleasures. Mrs Mitford was to have accompanied them, but she had slackened much in her ferocity of chaperonage, and had grown used to Kate, and not so much alarmed on her account. And it was a special day at the schools, and her work was more than usual. "My dear, if you wish it, of course I will go with you," she said to her young guest; "and you must not think me unkind to hesitate—but you are used to him now, and you will be quite safe with John. You don't mind going with John?"

"Oh, I don't mind it at all," said Kate, with a little blush, which would have excited

John's mother wonderfully two days before. But custom is a great power, and she had got used to Kate. So Mrs Mitford went to her parish work, and the two young people went out on their expedition. They had nearly a mile to walk across fields, and then through the grateful shade of a little wood. It was a pretty road, and from the moment they entered the wood, the common world disappeared from about the pair. They walked like a pair in romance, often silent, sometimes with a touch of soft embarrassment, in that silent world, full of the flutter of leaves and the flitting of birds, and the notes of, here and there, an inquiring thrush or dramatic blackbird. Boughs would crackle and swing suddenly about them, as if some fairy had swung herself within the leafy cover: unseen creatures—rabbits or squirrels—would dart away under the brushwood. Arrows of sunshine came down upon the brown underground. The leaves waved green above and black in shadow, strewing the chequered path. They walked in an atmosphere of their own, in dreamland, fairyland, by the shores of old romance; the young man

bending his head in that attitude of worship, which is the attitude of protection too, towards the lower, slighter, weaker creature, who raised her eyes to his with soft supremacy. It was hers to command and his to obey. She had no more doubt of the loyalty of her vassal than he had of her sweet superiority to every other created thing. And thus they went through the wood to the river,—two undeveloped lives approaching the critical point of their existence, and going up to it in a dream of happiness, without shadow or fear.

The river ran through the wood for about a mile ; but as it is a law of English nature that no stream shall have the charm of woodland on both sides at once, the northern bank was a bit of meadowland, round which ran, at some distance, a belt of trees. Kate recovered a little from the spell of silence as she took into her hands the cords of the rudder, and looked on at her companion's struggle against the current. "It must be hard work," she said. "How is it you are so fond of taking trouble, you men ? They say it ruins your health rowing in all those boat-races and things—all for

the pleasure of beating the other colleges or the other university ; and you kill yourselves for that ! I should like to do it for something better worth, if it were me."

"But if you don't get the habit of the struggle, you will want training when you try for what is better worth," said John. "How one talks ! I say *you*, as if by any chance you could want to struggle for anything. Pardon the profanity—I did not mean that."

"Why shouldn't I want to struggle ?" said Kate, opening her eyes very wide. "I do, sometimes—that is, I don't like to be beaten ; nobody does, I suppose. But hard work must be a great bore. I sit and look at my maid sometimes, and think, after all, how much superior she is to me. There she sits, stitching, stitching the whole day through, and it does not seem to do her any harm—whereas it would kill one of us. And then I order this superior being about—me, the most useless wretch ! and she gets up from her work to do a hundred things for me which I could quite well do for myself. Life is very odd," said the young moralist, pulling the wrong string,

and sending the boat high and dry upon a most visible bank of weeds and gravel. "Oh, Mr John, I am sure I beg your pardon! What have I done?"

"Nothing of the least importance," said John; and while Kate sat dismayed and wondering, he had plunged into the sparkling shallow stream, and pushed the fairy vessel off into its necessary depth of water. "Only pardon me for jumping in in this wild way and sprinkling your dress," he said, as he took his seat and his oars again. Kate was silent for the moment. She gazed at him with her pretty eyes, and her lips apart, wondering at the water-god; from which it will be clear to the reader that Kate Crediton was unused to river navigation, and the ways of boating men.

"But you will catch your death of cold, and what will your mother say?" said Kate; and this danger filled her with such vivid feminine apprehensions, that it was some time before she could be consoled. And then the talk ran on about a multitude of things—about nothing in particular—while the one interlocutor steered wildly into all the difficulties possible, and the

other toiled steadily against the current. It was a rapid, vehement little river, more like a Scotch or Welsh stream than a placid English one; and sometimes there were snags to be avoided, and sometimes shallows to be run upon, so that the voyage was not without excitement, with such a pilot at the helm.

But when John turned his little vessel, and it began to float down stream, the dreamy silence of the woodland walk began to steal over the two once more. "Ah! now the work is over," Kate said, with a little sigh; "yes, it is very nice to float—but then one feels as if one's own will had nothing to do with it. I begin to understand why the other is the best."

"I suppose they are both best," said John—which was not a very profound observation; and yet he sighed too. "And then it is so much easier in everything to go with the stream, and to do what you are expected to do."

"But is it right?" said Kate, with solemnity. "Ah! now I know what you are thinking about. I have so wanted to speak to you ever

since *that* night. Don't you think that doing what you are expected to do would be *wrong*? I have thought so much about it——"

"Have you?" said John; and a delicious tear came to the foolish fellow's eye. "It was too good of you to think of me at all."

"Of course I could not help thinking of you," said Kate, "after what you said. Perhaps you will not think my advice of much value; but I don't think—I don't really think you ought to do it. I feel that it would be wrong."

"There is no one in the world whose advice would be so much to me," cried foolish John. "My sight is clouded by—by self-interest, and habit, and a thousand things. I have never opened my heart to any one but you—and how I presumed to trouble you with it I can't tell," he went on, gazing at her with fond eyes, which Kate found it difficult to meet.

"Oh, that is natural enough. Don't you remember what you said?" she answered, softly; "what you did for me—and that moment when you said we might have died;

—we should be like—brother and sister—all our lives.”

“Not that,” said John, with a little start; “but—— Yes, I hold by my claim. I wish I had done something to deserve it, though. If I had known it was you——”

“How could you possibly know it was me when you did not know there was such a person as me in the world?” said Kate. “Don’t talk such nonsense, please.”

“No; was it possible that there was once a time when I did not know that there was you in the world? What a cold world it must have been!—how sombre and miserable!” cried the enthusiast. “I can’t realise it now.”

“Oh, please!—what nonsense you do talk, to be sure!” cried Kate; and then she gave her pretty head a little shake to dissipate the blush and the faint mist of some emotion that had been stealing over her eyes, and took up the interrupted strain. “Now that you do know there is a me, you must pay attention to me. I have thought over it a great deal. You must not do it—indeed you must not. A man who is not quite certain, how can he

teach others ? It would be like me steering—now there ! Oh, I am sure, I beg your pardon. Who was to know that nasty bank would turn up again ?”

“Never mind,” said John, when he had repeated the same little performance which had signalised their upward course ; “that is nothing—except that it interrupted what you were saying. Tell me again what you have thought.”

“But you never mean to be guided by me all the same,” said Kate, incautiously, though she must have foreseen, if she had taken a moment to think, that such a remark would carry her subject too far.

“Ah ! how can you say so—how can you think so ?” cried John, crossing his oars across the boat, and leaning over them, with his eyes fixed upon her, “when you must know I am guided by your every look. Don’t be angry with me. It is so hard to look at you and not say all that is in my heart. If you would let me think that I might—identify myself altogether—I mean, do only what pleased you—I mean, think of you as caring a little——”

“I care a great deal,” said Kate, with sudden temerity, taking the words out of his mouth, “or why should I take the trouble to say so much about it? I consider that we are—brother and sister; and that gives me a sort of right to speak. Stay till I have done, Mr John. Don’t you think you could be of more use in the world, if you were in the world and not out of it? Now think! Looking at it in your way, no doubt, it is very fine to be a clergyman; but you can only talk to people and persuade them, you know, and don’t have it in your power to do very much for them. Now look at a rich man like papa. He does not give his mind to that, you know. I am very sorry, but neither he nor I have had anybody to put it in our heads what we ought to do—but still he does some good in his way. If you were as rich as he is, how much you could do! You would be a good angel to the poor people. You could set right half of those dreadful things that Mrs Mitford tells us of, even in the village. You could give the lads work, and keep them steady. You could build them proper cot-

tages, and have them taught what they ought to know. Don't shake your head. I know you would be the people's good angel, if you were as rich as papa."

Poor John's countenance had changed many times during this address. His intent gaze fell from her, and returned and fell again. A shade came over his face—he shook his head, not in contradiction of what she said so much as in despondency; and when he spoke, his voice had taken a chill, as it were, and lost all the musical thrill of imagination and passion that was in it. "Miss Crediton," he said, mournfully, "you remind me of what I had forgotten—the great gulf there is between you and me. I had forgotten it, like an ass. I had been thinking of you not as a rich man's daughter, but as—— And I, a poor aimless fool, not able to make up my mind as to how I am to provide for my own life! Forgive me—you have brought me to myself."

"Now I should like to know what that has to do with it," cried Kate, with a little air of exasperation—exasperation more apparent than real. "I tell you I want you to be rich like

papa, and you answer me that I remind you I am a rich man's daughter! Well, what of that? I want you to be a rich man too. I can't help whose daughter I am. I did not choose my own papa—though I like him better than any other all the same. But I want you to be rich *too*, you understand; for many reasons."

"For what reasons?" said John, lighting up again. She had drooped her head a little when she said these last words. A bright blush had flushed all over her. Could it be that she meant—— John was not vain, and yet the inference was so natural; he sat gazing at her for one long minute in a suggestive tremulous silence, and then he went faltering, blundering on. "I would be anything for your sake—*that* you know. I would be content to labour for you from morning to night. I would be a ploughman for your sake. To be a rich man is not so easy; but if you were to tell me to do it—for you—I would work my fingers to the bone; I would die, but I should do it—for you. Am I to be rich for you?"

“Oh, fancy ! here we are already,” cried Kate, in a little tremor, feeling that she had gone too far, and he had gone too far, and thinking with a little panic, half of horror, half of pleasure, of the walk that remained to be taken through the enchanted wood. “How fast the stream has carried us down ! and yet I don’t suppose it can have been very fast either, for the shadows are lengthening. We must make haste and get home.”

“But you have not answered me,” he said, still leaning across his oars with a look which she could not face.

“Oh, never mind just now,” she cried ; “let us land, please, and not drift farther down. You are paying no attention to where the boat is going. There ! I knew an accident would happen,” cried Kate, with half-mischievous triumph, running the boat into the bank. She thought nothing now of his feet getting wet, as he stepped into the water again to bring it to the side that she might land. She even sprang out and ran on, telling him to follow her, while he had to wait to secure the boat, and warn the people at the

forester's cottage that he had left it. Kate ran on into the wood, up the broad road gradually narrowing among the trees, where still the sunshine penetrated like arrows of gold, and the leaves danced double, leaf and shadow, and the birds carried on their ceaseless interluding, and the living creatures stirred. She ran on mischievously, with a little laugh at her companion left behind. But that mood did not long balance the influence of the place. Her steps slackened—her heart began to beat. All at once she twined her arms about a birch to support herself, and, leaning her head against it, cried a little in her confusion and excitement. "Oh, what have I done? what shall I say to him?" Kate said to herself. Was she in love with John that she had brought him to this declaration of his sentiments? She did not know—she did not think she was—and yet she had done it with her eyes open. And in a few minutes he would be by her side insisting on an answer. "And what shall I say to him?" within herself cried Kate.

But when John came up breathless, she was

going along the road very demurely, without any signs of emotion, and glanced at him with the same look of friendly sovereignty, though her heart was quailing within her. He joined her, breathless with haste and excitement, and for a moment neither spoke. Then it was Kate who, in desperation, resumed the talk.

“You must tell me what you think another time,” she said, with an air of royal calm. “Perhaps what I have said has not been very wise ; but I meant it for good. I meant, you know, that the man of action can do most. I meant—— But, please, let us get on quickly, for I am so afraid we shall be too late for dinner. Your father does not like to wait. And you can tell me what you think another time.”

“What I think has very little to do with it,” said John. “It should be what you think—what you ordain. For you I will do anything—everything. Good heavens, what a nuisance!” cried the young man.

At this exclamation Kate looked up, and saw,—was it Isaac’s substitute—the ram caught in the thicket?—Fred Huntley riding

quietly towards them, coming down under the trees, like somebody in romance. "It is Mr Huntley," said Kate, with a mental thanksgiving which she dared not have put into words. "It is like an old ballad. Here is the knight on the white horse appearing under the trees just when he is wanted—that is, just when you were beginning to tire of my society; and here am I, the errant damosel—— What a nice picture it would make if he were only handsome, which he is not! But all the same, his horse is white."

"And I suppose I am the magician who is to be discomfited and put to flight," said John, with a grim attempt at a smile.

And here Kate's best qualities made her cruel. "You are—whatever you please," she said, turning upon him with the brightest sudden smile. She could not bear, poor fellow, that his feelings should be hurt, when she felt herself so relieved and easy in mind; and John, out of his despondency, went up to dazzling heights of confidence and hope. Fred, riding up, saw the smile, and said to himself, "What! gone so far already?" with a curious

sensation of pique. And yet he had no occasion to be piqued. He had never set up any pretensions to Kate's favour. He had foreseen how it would be when he last saw them together. It was something too ridiculous to feel as if he cared. Of course he did not care. But still there was a little pique in his rapid reflection as he came up to them. And they were all three a little embarrassed, which, on the whole, seemed uncalled for, considering the perfectly innocent and ordinary circumstances, which the boating-party immediately began with volubility to explain.

"We have been on the river," said Kate. "Mr Mitford so kindly offered to take me before I went away. And we hoped to have Mrs Mitford with us ; but at the last moment she could not come."

I daresay not, indeed, Fred Huntley said in his heart ; but he only looked politely indifferent, and made a little bow.

"Perhaps it was better she did not, for the boat is very small," said John, carrying on the explanation. Was it an apology they were making for themselves ? And so all at once,

notwithstanding Kate's romance about the knight on the white horse, all the enchantment disappeared from the fairy wood. Birds and rabbits and squirrels, creatures of natural history, pursued their common occupations about, without any fairy suggestions. It was only the afternoon sun that slanted among the trees, showing it was growing late, and not showers of golden arrows. The wood became as commonplace as a railroad, and Kate Crediton related to Fred Huntley how she was going home, and what was to happen, and how she hoped to meet his sisters at the Camelford ball.

Thus the crisis which John thought was to decide everything for him passed off in bathos and commonplace. He walked on beside the other two, who did all the talking, eating his heart. Had she been playing with him, making a joke of his sudden passion? But then she would give him a glance from time to time which spoke otherwise. "There is still an evening and a morning," John said to himself; and he stood like a churl at the Rectory gate, and suffered Huntley to ride on without the

slightest hint of a possibility that he should stay to dinner. Such inhospitable behaviour was not common at Fanshawe Regis. But there are moments in which politeness, kindness, neighbourly charities, must all give way before a more potent feeling, and John Mitford had arrived at one of these. And his heart was beating, his head throbbing, all his pulses going at the highest speed and out of tune—or, at least, that was his sensation. Kate disappeared while he stood at the gate, shutting it carefully upon Fred, and heaven knows what frightful interval might be before him ere he could resume the interrupted conversation, and demand the answer to which surely he had a right!

John's mind was in such a whirl of confusion that he could not realise what he was about to do. If he could have thought it over calmly, and asked himself what right he had to woo a rich man's daughter, or even to dream of bringing her to his level, probably poor John would not only have stopped short, but he might have had resolution enough to turn back and leave his father's door, and put him-

self out of the reach of temptation till she was safe in her own father's keeping. He had strength enough and resolution enough to have made such a sacrifice, had there been any time to think ; but sudden passion had swept him up like a whirlwind, and conquered all his faculties. He wanted to have an answer ; an answer—nothing more. He wanted to know what she meant—why it was that she was so eager with him to bring his doubtfulness to a conclusion. If he took her advice, what would follow ? There was a singing in his ears, and a buzzing in his brain. He could not think, nor pause to consider which was right. There was but one thing to do—to get his answer from her ; to know what she meant. And then the Deluge or Paradise—one thing or the other—would come after that, but were it Paradise, or were it the Flood, John's anchors were pulled up, and he had left the port. All his old prospects and hopes and intentions had vanished. He could no more go back to the position in which he had stood when he first opened his heart to Kate than he could fly. Fanshawe Regis, and his parents' hopes, and

the old placid existence to which he had been trained, all melted away into thin air. He was standing on the threshold of a new world, with an unknown wind blowing in his face, and an unknown career before him. If it might be that she was about to put her little hand in his, and go with him across the wilderness! But, anyhow, it was a wilderness that had to be traversed; not those quiet waters and green pastures which had been destined for him at home.

“How late you are, John!” his mother said, meeting him on the stair. She was coming down dressed for dinner, with just a little cloud over the brightness of her eyes. “You must have stayed a long time on the river. Was that Kate that has just gone up-stairs?”

“Miss Crediton went on before me. I had to stop and speak to Huntley at the gate.”

“You should have asked him to stay dinner,” said Mrs Mitford. “My dear, I am sure you have a headache. You should not have rowed so far, under that blazing sun. But make haste now. Your papa cannot bear

to be kept waiting. I will tell Jervis to give you five minutes. And, oh, make haste, my dear boy !”

“Of course I shall make haste,” said John, striding past—as if ten minutes more or less could matter to anybody under the sun !

“It is for your papa, John,” said Mrs Mitford, half apologetic, half reproachful ; and she went down to the drawing-room and surreptitiously moved the fingers of the clock to gain a little time for her boy. “Jervis, you need not be in such a hurry—there are still ten minutes,” she said, arresting the man-of-all-work who was called the butler at Fanshawe, as he put his hand on the dinner-bell to ring it ; and she was having a little discussion with him over their respective watches, when the Doctor approached in his fresh tie. “The drawing-room clock is never wrong,” said the deceitful woman. And no doubt that was why the trout was spoiled and the soup so cold. For Kate did not hurry with her toilette, whatever John might do ; and being a little agitated and excited, her hair took one of those perverse fits peculiar

to ladies' hair, and would not permit itself to be put up properly. Kate, too, was in a wonderful commotion of mind, as well as her lover. She was tingling all over with her adventure, and the hairbreadth escape she had made. But had she escaped? There was a long evening still before her, and it was premature to believe that the danger was over. When Kate went down-stairs, she had more than one reason for being so very uncomfortable. Dr Mitford was waiting for his dinner, and John was waiting for his answer; she could not tell what might happen to her before the evening was over, and she could scarcely speak with composure because of the frightened irregular beating of her heart.

CHAPTER X.

DINNER falling in a time of excitement like that which I have just described, with its suggestions of perfect calm and regularity, the unbroken routine of life, has a very curious effect upon agitated minds. John Mitford felt as if some catastrophe must have happened to him as he sat alone at his side of the table, and looked across at Kate, who was a little troubled too, and reflected how long a time he must sit there eating and drinking, or pretending to eat and drink ; obliged to keep at that distance from her—to address common conversation to her—to describe the boating, and the wood, and all that had happened, as if it had been the most ordinary expedition in the world. Kate was very kind to him in

this respect, though perhaps he was too far gone to think it kind. She took upon herself the weight of the conversation. She told Mrs Mitford quite fluently all about the boat and her bad steering, and all the accidents that had happened, and how John had jumped into the water. "I know you will never forgive me if he has caught cold," Kate said, glibly, with even a mischievous look in her eye; "but I must tell. And I do hope you changed your stockings," she said, leaning across the table to him with a smile. It was a mocking smile, full of mischief, and yet there was in it a certain softened look. It was then that poor John felt as if some explosion must take place, as he sat and restrained himself, and tried to look like a man interested in his dinner. Nobody else took any notice of his agitation, and probably even his mother did not perceive it; but Jervis the butler did, as he stood by his side, and helped Mr John to potatoes. He could not dissimulate the shaking of his hand.

"My dear, I should never blame *you*," said Mrs Mitford, with a little tremor in her

voice ; " he is always so very rash. Of course you changed, John ? "

" Oh, of course," he said, with a laugh, which sounded cynical and Byronic to his audience. And then he made a violent effort to master himself. " Miss Crediton thought the river was rather pretty," he added, with a hard-drawn breath of agitation, which sounded to his mother like the first appearance of the threatened cold.

" Jervis," she said, mildly, " will you be good enough to fetch me the camphor from my cupboard, and two lumps of sugar ? My dear boy, it is not nasty ; it is only as a precaution. It will not interfere with your dinner, and it is sure to stop a cold."

John gave his mother a look under which she trembled. It said as plainly as possible, you are making me ridiculous ; and it was pointed by a glance at Kate, who certainly was smiling. Mrs Mitford was quick enough to understand, and she was cowed by her son's gravity. " Perhaps, on second thoughts," she said, faltering, " you need not mind, Jervis. It will do when Mr John goes to bed."

"The only use of camphor is at the moment when you take a cold," said Dr Mitford ; "identify that moment, and take your dose, and you are all safe. But I have always found that the great difficulty was to identify the moment. Did you point out to Miss Crediton the curious effect the current has had upon the rocks ? I am not geological myself, but still it is very interesting. The constant friction of the water has laid bare a most remarkable stratification. Ah ! I see he did not point it out, from your look."

"Indeed I don't think Mr John showed me anything that was instructive," said Kate, with a demure glance at him. At present she was having it all her own way.

"Ah ! youth, youth," said Dr Mitford, shaking his head. "He was much more likely to tell you about his boating exploits, I fear. If you really wish to understand the history and structure of the district, you must take me with you, Miss Crediton. Young men are so foolish as to think these things slow."

"But then I am going away to-morrow," said Kate, with a little pathetic inflection of

her voice. "And perhaps Mrs Mitford will never ask me to come back again. And I shall have to give up the hope of knowing the district. But anybody that steers so badly as I do,"—Kate continued, with much humility, but doubtful grammar, "it is not to be wondered at if the gentleman who is rowing them should think they were too ignorant to learn."

"Then the gentleman who was rowing you was a stupid fellow," said the Doctor. "I never had a more intelligent listener in my life ; but, my dear young lady, you must come back when the Society is here. Their meeting is at Camelford, and they must make an excursion to the Camp."

"And you will come and stay with us, Dr Mitford," said Kate, coaxingly ; "now, promise. It will be something to look forward to. You shall have the room next the library, that papa always keeps for his learned friends, he says. And if Mrs Mitford would be good, and let the parish take care of itself, and come too——"

"Oh hush ! my dear ; we must not look forward so far," said Mrs Mitford, with a little

cloud upon her face. She had found out by this time that John was in trouble, and she had no heart to enter into any discussion till she knew what it was. And then she opened out suddenly into a long account of the Fanshawe family, *apropos de rien*. Mrs Fanshawe had been calling that afternoon, and they had heard from their granddaughter, Cicely, who was abroad for her health—for all that family was unfortunately very delicate. And poor Cicely would have to spend the winter at Nice, the doctor said. Kate bent her head over her plate, and ate her grapes (the very first of the season, which Mr Crediton's gardener had forced for his young mistress, and sent to Fanshawe Regis to aid her cure), and listened without paying much attention to the story of Cicely Fanshawe's troubles. Nobody else took any further part in the conversation after Mrs Mitford had commenced that monologue, except indeed the Doctor, who now and then would ask a question. As for the two young people, they sat on either side of the table, and tried to look as if nothing had happened. And Kate, for one, succeeded very

well in this laudable effort—so well that poor John, in his excitement and agitation, sank to the depths of despair as he twisted one of the great vine-leaves in his fingers, and watched her furtively through all the windings of his mother's story. He said to himself, it is nothing to her. Her mind is quite unmoved by anything that has happened. She could not have understood him, John felt—she could not have believed him. She must have thought he was saying words which he did not mean. Perhaps that was the way among the frivolous beings to whom she was accustomed; but it was not the way with John.

While the mother was giving that account of the young Fanshawes, and the father interposing his questions about Cicely's health, their son was working himself up into a fever of determination. He eyed Kate at the other side of the table, with a certain rage of resolution mingling with his love. She should not escape him like this. She should answer him one way or another. He could bear anything or everything from her except this silence; but that he would not bear. She should tell

him face to face. He might have lost the very essence and joy of life, but still he should know downright that he had lost it. This passion was growing in him while the quiet slumberous time crept on, and all was told about Cicely Fanshawe. Poor Cicely! just Kate's age, and sent to Nice to die; but that thought never occurred to the vehement young lover, nor did it occur to Kate, as she sat and ate her grapes, and gave little glances across the table, and divined that he was rising to a white heat. "I must run off to my own room, and say it is to do my packing," Kate said to herself, with a little quake in her heart; and yet she would rather have liked—behind a curtain or door, out of harm's way—to have heard him say what he had to say.

Mrs Mitford was later than usual of leaving the table—and she took Kate by the arm, being determined apparently to *contrarier* everybody on this special evening, and made her sit down on the sofa by her in the drawing-room. "My dear, I must have you to myself for a little while to-night," she said, drawing the girl's

hands into her own. And then she sat and talked. It seemed to Kate that she talked of everything in heaven and earth; but the old singing had come back to her ears, and she could not pay attention. "Now he is coming," she said to herself; "now I shall be obliged to sit still all the evening; now I shall never be able to escape from him." By-and-by, however, Kate began to feel piqued that John should show so little eagerness to follow her. "Yes, indeed, dear Mrs Mitford, you may be sure I shall always remember your kindness," she said, aloud. But in her heart she was saying in the same breath, "Oh, very well; if he does not care I am sure I do not care. I am only too glad to be let off so easy;" which was true, and yet quite the reverse of true.

But then Kate did not see the watcher outside the window in the darkness, who saw all that was going on, and bided his time, though he trembled with impatience and excitement. Not knowing he was there, she came to have a very disdainful feeling about him as the moments passed on. To ask such a question as that, and never to insist on an answer! Well,

he might be very nice ; but what should she do with a man that took so little pains to secure his object. Or was it his object at all ? He might be cleverer than she had taken him for ; he might be but playing with her, as she had intended to play with him. Indignant with these thoughts, she rose up when Mrs Mitford's last words came to a conclusion, and detached herself, not without a slight coldness, from that kind embrace. "I must go and see to my things, please," she said, raising her head like a young queen. "But, my dear, there is Parsons," said Mrs Mitford. "Oh, but I must see after everything myself," replied Kate, and went away, not in haste, as making her escape, but with a certain stateliness of despite. She walked out of the room in quite a leisurely way, feeling it beneath her dignity to fly from an adversary that showed no signs of pursuing ; and even turned round at the door to say something with a boldness which looked almost like bravado. He will come now, no doubt, and find me gone, and I hope he will enjoy the *tête-à-tête* with his mother, she mused, with a certain ferocity ; and so went carelessly out,

with all the haughtiness of pique, and walked almost into John Mitford's arms !

He seized her hand before she knew what had happened, and drew it through his arm, first throwing a shawl round her, which he had picked up somewhere, and which, suddenly curling round her like a lasso, was Kate's first indication of what had befallen her. "I have been watching you till I am half wild," he whispered in her ear. "Oh come with me to the garden, and say three words to me. I have no other chance for to-night."

"Oh, please, let me go. I must see to my packing—indeed I must," cried Kate, so startled and moved by the suddenness of the attack, and by his evident excitement, that she could scarcely keep from tears.

"Not now," said John, in her ear—"not now. I must have my answer. You cannot be so cruel as to go now. Only half an hour—only ten minutes—Kate !"

"Hush ! oh hush !" she cried, feeling herself conquered ; and ere she knew, the night air was blowing in her face, and the dark sky, with its faint little summer stars, was shining over

her, and John Mitford, holding her close, with her hand on his arm, was bending over her, a dark shadow. She could not read in his face all the passion that possessed him, but she felt it, and it made her tremble, woman of the world as she was.

“Kate,” he said, “I cannot go searching for words now. I think I will go mad if you don’t speak to me. Tell me what I am to hope for. Give me my answer. I cannot bear any more.”

His voice was hoarse ; he held her hand fast on his arm, not caressing, but compelling. He was driven out of all patience ; and for the first time in her life Kate’s spirit was cowed, and her wit failed to the command of the situation.

“Let me go !” she said ; “oh, do let me go ! you frighten me, Mr John.”

“Don’t call me Mr John. I am your slave, if you like ; I will be anything you please. You said just now we belonged to each other ; so we do. No, I can’t be generous ; it is not the moment to be generous. I have a claim upon you—don’t call me Mr John.”

“Then what shall I call you ?” Kate said,

with a little hysterical giggle. And all at once, at that most inappropriate moment, there flashed across her mind the first name she had recognised his identity by. *My John*—was that the alternative? She shrank a little and trembled, and did not know whether she should laugh or cry. Should she call him that just as an experiment, to see how he would take it?—or what else could she do to escape from him out of this dark place, all full of dew, and odours, and silence, into the light and the safety of her own room? And yet all this time she made no attempt to withdraw her hand from his arm. She wanted something to lean on at such a crisis, and he was very handy for leaning on—tall, and strong, and sturdy, and affording a very adequate support. “Oh, do let me go!” she burst out all at once. “It was only for your own good I spoke to you; I did not mean—this. Why should you do things for *me*? I don’t want—to make any change. I should like to have you always just as we have been—friends. Don’t say any more just yet—listen. I like you very very much for a

friend. You said yourself we were like brother and sister. Oh, why should you vex me and bother me, and want to be anything different?" said Kate, in her confusion, suddenly beginning to cry without any warning. But next moment, without knowing how it was, she became aware that she was crying very comfortably on John's shoulder. Her crying was more than he could bear. He took her into his arms to console her without any *arrière pensée*. "Oh, my darling, I am not worth it," he said, stooping over her. "Is it for me—that would never let the wind blow on you? Kate! I will not trouble you any more." And with that, before he was aware, in his compunction and sympathy, his lips somehow found themselves close to her cheek. It was all to keep her from crying—to show how sorry he was for having grieved her. His heart yearned over the soft tender creature. What did it matter what he suffered, who was only a man? But that Kate should cry!—and that it should be his fault! He felt in his simplicity that he was giving her up for ever, and his big heart almost broke, as he

bent down trembling, and encountered that soft warm velvet cheek.

How it happened I cannot tell. He did not mean it, and she did not mean it. But certainly Kate committed herself hopelessly by crying there quite comfortably on his shoulder, and suffering herself to be kissed without so much as a protest. He was so frightened by his own temerity, and so surprised at it, that even had she vindicated her dignity after the first moment, and burst indignant from his arms, John would have begged her pardon with abject misery, and there would have been an end of him. But somehow Kate was bewildered, and let that moment pass; and after the surprise and shock which his own unprecedented audacity wrought in him, John grew bolder, as was natural. She was not angry; she endured it without protest. Was it possible that in her trouble she was unconscious of it? And involuntarily John came to see that boldness was now his only policy, and that it must not be possible for her to ignore the facts of the case. That was all simple enough. But as

for Kate, I am utterly unable to explain her conduct. Even when she came to herself, all she did was to put up her hands to her face, and to murmur piteously, humbly, "Don't! oh, please, don't!" And why shouldn't he, when that was all the resistance she made?

After this, the young man being partly delirious, as might have been expected, it was Kate who had to come to the front of affairs and take the lead. "Do, please, be rational now," she said, shaking herself free all in a moment. "And give me your arm, you foolish John, and let us take a turn round the garden. Oh, what would your mother say if she knew how ridiculous you have been making yourself? Tell me quietly what it is you want now," she added, in her most coaxing tone, looking up into his face.

Upon which the bewildered fellow poured forth a flood of ascriptions of praise and pæans of victory, and compared Kate, who knew she was no angel, to all the deities and excellences ever known to man. She listened to it all patiently, and then shook her head with gentle half-maternal tolerance.

“Well,” she said, “let us take all that for granted, you know. Of course I am everything that is nice. If you did not think so you would be a savage; but, John, please don’t be foolish. Tell me properly. I have gone and given in to you when I did not mean to. And now, what do you want?”

“I want you,” he said; “have you any doubt about that? And, except for your sake, I don’t care for anything else in the world.”

“Oh, but I care for a great many things,” said Kate. “And, John,” she went on, joining both her hands on his arm, and leaning her head lightly against it in her caressing way, “first of all, you have accepted my conditions, you know, and taken my advice?”

“Yes, my darling,” said John; and then somehow his eye was caught by the lights in the windows so close at hand, the one in the library, the other in the drawing-room, where sat his parents, who had the fullest confidence in him; and he gave a slight start and sigh in spite of himself.

“Perhaps you repent your bargain already,” said impetuous Kate, being instantly conscious

of both start and sigh, and of the feeling which had produced them.

“Ah! how can you speak to me so,” he said, “when you know if it was life I had to pay for it I would do it joyfully? No; even if I had never seen you I could not have done what they wanted me. That is the truth. And now I have you, my sweetest——”

“Hush,” she said, softly, “we have not come to that yet. There is a great deal, such a great deal, to think about; and there is papa——”

“And I have so little to offer,” said John; “it is only now I feel how little. Ah! how five minutes change everything! It never came into my mind that I had nothing to offer you—I was so full of yourself. But now!—you who should have kingdoms laid at your feet—what right had a penniless fellow like me——”

“If you regret you can always go back,” said Kate, promptly; “though, you know, it is a kind of insinuation against me, as if I had consented far too easy. And, to tell the truth, I never did consent.”

Here poor John clutched at her hand, which

seemed to be sliding from his arm, and held it fast without a word.

“No, I never did consent,” said Kate. “It was exactly like the savages that knock a poor girl down and then carry her off. You never asked me even—you took me. Well, but then the thing to be drawn from that, is not any nonsense about giving up. If you will promise to be good, and do everything I tell you, and let me manage with papa——”

“But it is my business to let him know,” said John. “No, my darling—not even for you. I could not skulk, nor do anything underhand. I must tell *him*, and I must tell them——”

“Then you will have your way, and we shall come to grief,” said Kate; “as if I did not know papa best. And then—I am not half nor quarter so good as you; but in some things I am cleverer than you, John.”

“In everything, dear,” he said, with one of those ecstatic smiles peculiar to his state of folly, though in the darkness Kate did not get the benefit of it. “I never have, never will compare myself to my darling. It is all your

goodness letting me—all your sweetness and humility and——”

“Please don’t,” said Kate, “please stop—please don’t talk such nonsense. Oh, I hope I shall never behave so badly that you will be forced to find me out. But now about papa. It must be me to tell him; you may come in afterwards, if you like. I know what I shall do. I will drive the phaeton to the station to meet him. I *will* be the one to tell him first. John, I know what I am talking of, and I must have my own way.”

“Are you out there, John, in the dark? and who have you got with you?” said Mrs Mitford’s voice suddenly in their ears. It made them jump apart as if it had been the voice of a ghost. And Kate, panting, blazing with blushes in the darkness, feeling as if she never could face those soft eyes again, recoiled back into the lilies, and felt the great white paradise of dew and sweetness take her in, and busk her round with a garland of odour. Oh, what was she to do? Would he be equal to the emergency? Thus it will be seen that, though she was very fond of him, she had not

yet the most perfect confidence in the reliability of her John.

“Yes, mother, I am here,” said John, with a mellow fulness in his voice which Kate could not understand, so different was it from his usual tone, “and I have Kate with me—my Kate—your Kate; or, at least, there she is among the lilies. She ought to be in your arms first, after mine.”

“After yours!” His mother gave a little scream. And Kate held up her head among the flowers, blushing, yet satisfied. It was shocking of him to tell; but yet it settled the question. She stood irresolute for a moment, breathing quick with excitement, and then she made a little run into Mrs Mitford’s arms. “He has made me be engaged to him whether I will or not,” she said, half crying on her friend’s shoulder. “He has *made* me. Won’t you love me too?”

“O Kate!” was all the mother could say. “O my boy! what have you done?—what have you done? John, her father is ten times as rich as we are. He will say we have abused his trust. Oh! what shall I do?”

“Abused his trust indeed!” said Kate. “John, you are not to say a word; she does not understand. Why, it was I who did it all! I gave him no peace. I kept talking to him of things I had no business with; and he is only a man—indeed he is only a boy. Mamma, won’t you kiss me, please?” said Kate, all at once sinking into the meekest of tones; upon which Mrs Mitford, quite overcome, and wanting to kiss her son first, and with a hundred questions in her mind to pour out upon him, yet submitted, and put her arm round the stranger who was clinging to her and kissed Kate—but not with her heart. She had kissed her a great deal more tenderly only yesterday, just to say good-night; and then the three stood silent in the darkness, and the scene took another shape, and John’s beatitude was past. The moment the mother joined them another world came in. The enchanted world, which held only two figures, opened up and disappeared like a scene at a theatre; and lo! there appeared all round a mass of other people to whom John’s passion was a matter of indifference or a thing to be disapproved.

Suddenly the young pair felt themselves standing not only before John's anxious mother, but before Mr Crediton, gloomy and wretched; before Dr Mitford, angry and mortified; before the whole neighbourhood, who would judge them without much consideration of mercy. John's reflections at this moment were harder to support than those of Kate, for he knew he was giving up for her sake the vocation he had been trained to, and the awful necessity of declaring his resolution to his father and mother was before him. Whereas the worst that could be said of Kate was that she was a little flirt, and had turned John Mitford's head—and she had heard as much before. But, notwithstanding, they were both strangely sobered all in a moment as they stood there, fallen out of their fairy sphere, by Mrs Mitford's side.

“My dears, I must hear all about this after,” she said, with a kind of tremulous solemnity, “but in the mean time you must come in to tea. Whatever we do, we must not be late for prayers.”

CHAPTER XI.

THE room was in its usual partially lighted state, with darkness in all the corners, half-seen furniture, and ghostly pictures on the walls. A minute ago the servants had been there in a line kneeling at prayers—dim beings, something between pictures and ghosts. And now they had just stolen out in procession, and Dr Mitford had seated himself at the table for the regulation ten minutes which he spent with his family before retiring for the night. Kate had drawn a low chair close to the table, and was looking up at him with a little quiver of anxiety about her lips and eyes. These two—the old man's venerable white head throwing reflections from it in the soft lamp-light, the young girl all radiant with beauty and feeling—were alone within the circle of

light. Outside of it stood two darker shadows, John and his mother. Mrs Mitford was in a black gown, and the bright tints of her pleasant face were neutralised by the failure of light. Two in the brightness and two in the gloom — a curious symbolical arrangement. And behind them all was the great open window, full of darkness, and the garden with all its unseen sweetness outside.

Dr Mitford was the only unconscious member of this curious party. He had no suspicion and no alarm. He stretched his legs, which were not long, out comfortably before him, and leant back composedly, now on the elbows, now on the back, of his chair.

“ Well, Miss Kate, and what have you been doing with yourself all the evening ? ” he said, in his blissful ignorance. The other three gave a simultaneous gasp. What would he think when he heard ? This thought, however, pressed hardest upon John. His mind was laden with a secret which as yet nobody divined, and speech almost forsook him when he had most need of it. Neither Kate nor his mother could see how pale he grew, and even if there

had been light enough, John was not a handsome pink-and-white youth upon whom a sudden pallor shows. He might have shirked it even now, or left it to his mother, or chosen a more convenient moment. But he was uncompromising in his sense of necessities, and now was the moment at which it must be done. He went round quickly to his father's right hand—

“Father,” he said, “I have got something to tell you. I have done what perhaps was not prudent, but I trust you will not think it was not honourable. I have fallen in love with Kate.”

“God bless my soul!” said Dr Mitford, instantly abandoning his comfortable attitude, and sitting straight up in his bewilderment. He was so startled that he looked from one to another, and finally turned to his wife, as a man does who has referred every blunder and surprise of a lifetime to her for explanation. It was an appealing half-reproachful glance. Here was something which no doubt she could have prevented or staved off from him. “My dear, what is the meaning of this?” he said.

“It is I who must tell you that,” said John, firmly. “I have a great deal to tell you—a great deal to explain to my mother as well as you. But this comes first of all—I love Kate. I saved her, you know; and then it seemed so natural that she should be mine. How could she have taken any one else than me who would have died for her? And see, father, she has consented,” said the poor fellow, taking Kate’s hand, and holding it in both his. His eyes were full of tears, and there was a smile on his face. It was that mingling of pathos and of triumph which marks passion at the highest strain.

“God bless my soul!” said Dr Mitford again, and this time he rose to his feet in his amazement. “My dear, if you heard this was going on, why did not you tell me? Consented! why, she is a mere child, and her father trusted her to us. Miss Kate, you must perceive he is talking nonsense—you must have turned his head. This can’t go any further. The boy must be mad to think of such a thing.”

“Then I am mad too,” said Kate, softly. “Oh, please, do not be angry with us—we

could not help it. Oh, Mrs Mitford, say a word for John!”

And then there came a strange pause. The mother said nothing. She stood in the shade holding back, insensible, as it seemed, to this appeal; and on the other side of the table were the young pair, holding each other fast. As for Dr Mitford, he came to himself slowly as Kate spoke. A ray of intelligence passed over his face. He was a sensible man, and not one to throw away the good the gods provided. Gradually it became apparent to him that there are times when youthful folly brings about results such as mature wisdom could scarcely have conceived possible. From the first stupefaction his look brightened into surprise, then into interest and half-disguised approval. He drew a long breath, and when he spoke again, his voice was wonderfully changed.

“Then you must be more to blame than he is, my dear young lady, for you have not the same temptation,” he said, with a little flurry and excitement, but not much apparent displeasure. And then he made a pause, and looked at them with his brow contracted as if

they were a book. "I don't understand all this. Do you mean to tell me you are engaged, and it is not three weeks yet——"

"It did not want three weeks," said John, "nor three days. Father, you see it is done now; she has consented, and she ought to know best."

"I am utterly bewildered," said Dr Mitford, but his tone softened more and more. "My dear, have you nothing to say to this? is it as unexpected to you as it is to me? Miss Kate, you understand it is no reluctance to receive you that overwhelms me, but the surprise—and—— My dear, is it possible you have nothing to say?"

"It is her father I am thinking of," said Mrs Mitford, suddenly, with a sharp jarring sound of emotion in her voice. And so it was; but not entirely that. She seized upon the only feasible objection that occurred to her to cover her general consternation and sense of dismay.

"Yes, to be sure," said Dr Mitford. "John, I wish you had spoken to Mr Crediton first. I shall explain to him that I knew nothing about it—nothing at all till the last moment. I fear

you have taken away from me even the power of pleading your cause ; though, Miss Kate," he said, rising, and going up to her with the urbanity which was so becoming to him, "if you had no fortune, I should take the liberty to kiss you, and tell you my son had made a charming choice."

"Then kiss me now," said Kate, suddenly detaching herself from John, and holding out her hands to his father. Dr Mitford gave a little irresolute glance behind him to see what his wife was thinking ; and then after a moment's hesitation, melted by the pretty face lifted to him, by the fortune which he had thus set forward as a drawback to her, and by the mingled sentiment, false and true, of the occasion, took her hands into his and bent over her and kissed her forehead.

"My dear," he said, with effusion, "I could not have hoped for so sweet a daughter-in-law. You would be as welcome to me as the flowers in May." And then Dr Mitford paused, and the puckers came back to his forehead, and he turned round on his heel as on a pivot, and faced his son. "But don't for a moment sup-

pose, John, that I can approve of *you*. I will not adopt your cause with Mr Crediton. Good heavens! he might think it was a scheme. He might think——”

“*That* he could never think,” said Mrs Mitford, not able to restrain her impatience. “He may be angry, and blame everybody, and do away with it—but he could not think that.”

“If I have done wrong, let it come upon me,” said John, hoarsely. “But, Kate, come! you have had enough to bear.” He was thinking of her only, not of what any one else had to bear; and it was hard upon Mrs Mitford. And it was hard upon her, very hard, to take the interloper into her arms again, and falter forth a blessing on her. “He is everything in the world to me,” she whispered, with her lips on Kate’s cheek. “And what should his wife be? But my heart seems dead to-night.” “Dear mamma, don’t hate me. I will not take him away from you; and I have no mother,” Kate whispered back. And Mrs Mitford held her close for a moment, and cried, and was lightened at her heart. But this little interlude was unknown to the two men who

stood looking on. John led his betrothed away into the hall, where he lingered one moment before he said good-night. What he said to her, or she to him, is not much to our present purpose. They lingered and whispered, and clung to each other as most of us have done once in our lives—and could not make up their minds to separate. While this went on, Dr Mitford made a little turn about the table in his excitement, and thrust up the shade from the lamp, as if to throw more light upon the matter. He was in a fidget, and a little alarmed by what his son had done, yet prepared to feel that all was for the best.

“My dear, is it possible you knew of this?” he said, rubbing his hands. “What a very odd thing that it should have happened so! Bless my soul! she is a great heiress. Why, Mary,” giving a glance round him, and lowering his voice a little, “who could have thought that lump of a boy would have had the sense to do so well for himself?”

“Oh, Dr Mitford, for heaven’s sake don’t speak so! Whatever he intends, my boy never thought of that.”

“I don’t suppose he did,” said the father, still softly rubbing his hands; “I don’t suppose he did—but still, all the same. Why, bless my soul! Mary—— To be sure it may be unpleasant with Mr Crediton. If he could think for one moment that we had any hand in it——”

“He cannot think that,” said Mrs Mitford. A sense that there was something more to be told kept her breathless and incapable of speech. But it gave her a little consolation to be able to defy Mr Crediton’s suspicions. It was a safety-valve, so far as it went.

“I hope not—I sincerely hope not. I should tell him at once that it is—well—yes—contrary to my wishes. Of course it would be a great thing for John. He is not the sort of boy to make his way in the world, and this would give him such a start. Unless her father is very adverse, Mary, I should be inclined to think that everything is for the best.”

“You are so ready to think that, Dr Mitford,” said his wife, sitting down suddenly in her excitement, feeling that her limbs could no

longer support her. "But I am afraid I am not so submissive," she added, with a little burst of feeling, putting up her hand to her eyes.

"You don't mean to say you don't see the advantages of it?" said her husband; "or is it the girl you object to? She seems to me to be a very nice girl."

"Oh, hush!" said Mrs Mitford; "do not let him hear you. Oh my boy! my boy!"

John came in with his face just settling out of the melting tenderness of his good-night into the resolution which was necessary for what was now before him. He saw that his mother, half hidden in her chair, had covered her eyes with her hand; and his father stood by the table, as if he had been arguing, or reasoning, or explaining something. It was not an attitude very unusual with Dr Mitford; but explaining things to his wife, notwithstanding her respect for him, was not an effort generally attended with much success.

"I tell you, my dear," he said, as John approached, with the air of concluding an argu-

ment, "that if Mr Crediton does not object, I shall think John has made an excellent choice."

"Thank you, father," John said, and held out his hand; while the mother, whose anxieties on the subject went so much deeper, sat still on her chair and covered her face, and felt a sharp pang of irritation strike through her. She had trained the boy to be very respectful, very dutiful, to his father; but Dr Mitford spent much of his time in his study, and there could not be much sympathy between them; yet the two stood clasping hands while she was left out. It was the strangest transposition of parts. She could not understand it, and it jarred through her with sudden pain. Nor did John seek her after that, as surely, she thought, he must do. He stood between them in front of the table, and kept looking straight, not at either of them, but at the light.

"I have had something else on my mind for a long time," he said, and his lips were parched with excitement. "Father, it is a long affair: will you sit down again and listen to what I have to say?"

“If it is about this business,” said his father, “I have told you already, John, that nothing can be done without her father’s consent; and I have not time, you know, to waste in talk. Tell your mother what it is; I shall have it all from her. I have given you my consent and approbation conditionally. Your mother, surely, can do all the rest.”

“Wait,” said John; “pray, wait a little. It is not about this. I want to tell you and my mother both together. I should not have the courage,” he added, with the excitement of self-defence, “to speak to you separately. It has nothing to do with this. It was a burden upon my mind before I ever saw Kate. And now that everything has come to a crisis, I must speak. It cannot be delayed any longer. Hear me for this once.”

Mrs Mitford gave a stifled groan. It was very low, but the room was very silent; and the sound startled all of them—even herself. It sounded somehow as if it had come in through the window out of the dark. She raised herself up suddenly and opened her eyes, and uncovered her face, and looked at

them both, lest any one should say it was she. Yes, she had foreseen it all the time ; she had felt it, since ever that girl came to the house—which was not, it must be admitted, entirely just.

“ You have brought me up to be a clergyman,” said John, still more and more hurried, “ and there was a time when I accepted the idea as a matter of course ; but since I have grown older, things are different. I cannot bear to disappoint you, and overturn all your plans ; but, father, think ! Can I undertake to say from the altar things I cannot believe ? Ought I to do that ? If I were a boy, it might be different, and I might learn better ; but at my age——”

“ Age !” said the Doctor, impatiently, “ what is all this about ? Age ? of course you are a boy, and nothing else. And why shouldn’t you believe ? Better men than you have gone over all that ground, and settled it again and again.”

“ But, father, I cannot be guided by what other people think. I must judge for myself. I cannot do it ! I have tried to carry out

your expectations until the struggle has been almost more than I could bear. Forgive me : it has come to be a question of possibility——”

“ A question of fiddlestick ! ” cried the Doctor, angrily, walking about the room. “ I tell you, better men than you have settled all that. Of course you think your doubts are quite original, and never were heard of before. Nonsense ! I have not the slightest doubt they have been refuted a hundred times over. Stuff ! Mary, is it to be expected I should give in to him ?—just when it was a comfort to think he was provided for, and all that. Are you such a fool as to think you can meet Mr Crediton with this story ? Is he to understand at once that you mean to live on your wife ? ”

“ I will never live on my wife,” said John, stung in the tenderest point.

“ Oh, Dr Mitford, don’t speak to him so,” said his mother, rising up and throwing herself metaphorically between the combatants. “ Do you think if he had not had a very strong reason he would have said this to us,

knowing how it would grieve us? Oh, let him tell us what he means!"

"I know what he means," said Dr Mitford, "better than he does himself. He thinks it is a fine thing to be a sceptic. His father believes what he can't believe, and that makes him out superior to his father. And then here is Kate Crediton with all her money——"

"Father!" cried John, pale with rage.

"Oh, hush, hush!" said Mrs Mitford; "that has nothing to do with it. Oh, don't let us bring her name in to make bitterness. John, John, do not say anything hasty! We had so set our hearts upon it. And, dear, your papa might explain things to you if you would but have patience. He never knew you had any doubts before."

"Mother," said John, with tears in his eyes, turning to her, "it is like you to take my part."

"But he must have a very strong reason," she went on, without heeding him, addressing her husband, "to be able to make up his mind to disappoint us so. Don't be hard upon our poor boy. If you were to argue with him,

and explain things—I am sure my John did not mean any harm. Oh, consider, John!—Fanshawe, that you were born in—how could you bear to see it go to others? And the poor people that know you so well—— Dr Mitford, when all this is over, and—strangers gone, and we are quiet again, you will take the boy with you, and go over everything and explain——”

“The fact is,” said the Doctor, suddenly going to the side table and selecting his candle, “that I have no time to waste on such nonsense. You can have what books you want out of my library, and I hope your own sense and reflection will carry the day. Not a word more. You are excited, I hope, and that is the cause of this exhibition. No; of course I don’t accept what you have said. Speak to your mother—that is the best thing you can do. I have got my paper to finish, so good-night.”

John stood aghast, and watched his father go out at the door, impatient and contemptuous of the explanation it had cost him so much to make. And when he turned to his mother,

expecting her sympathy, she was standing by him transformed, with a gleam of fire in her eyes such as he had never seen there; a flush on her face, and her hand held up with indignant, almost threatening, vehemence.

“How could you do it?” she cried—“how could you have the heart to do it? To us that have had no thought but for you! Look what sacrifices we have made all your life that you should have everything. Look how your father has worked at his papers—and all that we have done to secure your prosperity. And for the sake of a silly girl you had never seen a month ago! Oh, God forgive me! what shall I do?”

And she sank down on her chair and covered her face, and burst into angry weeping. It was not simple sorrow, but mortification, rage, disappointment — a combination of feelings which it was impossible for John to identify with his mother. She had been defending him but a moment before. It had given him a sense of the most exquisite relief to find her on his side. He had turned to her without doubt or fear, expecting that she would cry a

little, perhaps, and lament over him, and be wistfully respectful of his doubts, and tender of his sufferings. And to see her confronting him, flushed, indignant, almost menacing! His consternation was too great for words. "Mother," he said, faltering, "you are mistaken—indeed you are mistaken!" and stopped short, with mingled resentment and humiliation. Why should Kate be supposed to have anything to do with it? And yet in his heart he knew that she had a great deal to do with it. Her—but not her fortune, as his father thought. Curse her fortune! John, who had always been so gentle, walked up and down the room like a caged lion, with a hundred passions in his heart. He was wild with mortification, and with that sense of the intolerable which accompanies the first great contrariety of a life. Nothing (to speak of) had ever gone cross with him before. But now his mother herself had turned against him—could such a thing be possible?—and the solid earth had been rent away from under his feet.

Neither of them knew how long it was be-

fore anything more was said. Mrs Mitford sobbed out her passion, and dried her tears, and remained silent ; and so did John, till the air seemed to stir round him with wings and rustlings as of unseen spectators. It was only when it had become unbearable that he broke the silence. "Mother," he said, with a voice which even to his own ears sounded harsh and strange, "you have always believed me till now. When I tell you that this has been in my heart ever since I left Oxford—and while I was at Oxford—and that I have always refrained from telling you, hoping that when the time of decision came I might feel differently—will you refuse to believe me *now*?"

Mrs Mitford was incapable of making any reply. "Oh, John," she said—"oh, my boy!" shaking her head mournfully, while the tears dropped from her eyes. She did not mean to imply that she would not believe him. Poor soul! she did not very well know what she meant, except utter confusion and misery ; but that was the meaning which her gesture bore to him.

"I have done nothing to deserve this," he

said, with indignation. "You have a right to be as severe upon me as you like for disobeying your wishes, but you have no right to disbelieve your son."

"Oh, John, what is the use of speaking?" said Mrs Mitford. "Disbelieve you! why should I disbelieve you? The best thing is just to say nothing more about it, but let me break my heart and take no notice. What am I that I should stand in your way? Your father will get the better of it, for he has so many things to occupy him; but I will never get the better of it. Don't take any notice of me; the old must give up, whatever happens—I know that—and the young must have their day."

"Yes; the young must have their day," said John, severely; and then his heart smote him, and he came and knelt down by his mother's side. "But why should you be in such despair?" he said. "Mother, I am not going away from you. Though I should not be curate of Fanshawe Regis, may not we all be very happy together?—as happy in a different way? Mother, dear, I thought you were

the one to stand by me, whoever should be against me."

"And so I will stand by you," she sobbed, permitting him to take her hand and caress it. "Nobody shall say I do not stand up for my own boy. You shall have your mother for your defender, John, if it should kill me. But oh, my heart is broke!" she cried, leaning her head against his shoulder. "Now and then even a boy's mother must think of herself. All my dreams were about you, John. I have not been so happy, not so very happy, in my life. Other women have been happier than me, and more thought of, that perhaps have done no more than I have. But I have always said to myself, I have my John. I thought you would make it up to me; I thought my happiness had all been saving up—all waiting till I was growing old, and needed it most. Don't cry, my dear. I would not have you cry, you that are a man, as if you were a girl. Oh, if I had had a girl of my own, I think I could have borne it better. But she would have gone off and married too. There, there! I am very selfish speaking about my feelings. I will never do it again. What

does anything matter to me if you are happy? My dear, go to bed now, and don't take any more notice. It was the shock, you know. In the morning you will see I shall have come to myself."

"But, mother, it matters most to me that you should understand me," cried John—"you who have been everything to me. Do you think I am going to forget who has trained me, and taught me, and guided me since ever I remember? What difference will this make between you and me? Does giving up the Church mean giving up my mother? Never, never! I should give up even my own conscience, whatever it cost me, could I think that."

"Oh, John, my dear, perhaps if things were rightly explained——?" she faltered, raising her voice with a little spring of hope, and looking anxiously in his face. But she saw no hope there, and then her voice grew tremulous and solemn. "John, do you think it will bring a blessing on you to turn back after you have put your hand to the plough, and forsake God for the world? Is that the way to get His grace?"

“Will God be better pleased with me if I stand up at the altar before Him and say a lie?” said John. “Mother, you who are so true and just, you cannot think what you say.”

“But it is truth you have to speak, and not lies,” said the unused controversialist, with a thousand wistful pleas, which were not arguments, in her eyes; and then she threw her tender arms round her son, and clasped him to her. “Oh, my boy, what can I say? It is because of the shock and my not expecting it. I think my heart is broken. But go to bed, my dear, and think no more of me for to-night.”

“I cannot bear you saying your heart is broken,” cried John. “Mother, don’t be so hard upon me. I must act according to my conscience, whatever I may have to bear.”

“Oh, John! God knows I don’t mean to be hard upon you!” cried Mrs Mitford, stung with the reproach. And then she rose up trembling, her pretty grey hair ruffled about her forehead, her eyes wet and shining with so great a strain of emotion. Thus she stood for a moment, looking at him with such a

faint effort at a smile as she could accomplish. "Perhaps things will look different in the morning," she said; softly, "if we say our prayers with all our hearts before we go to bed."

And with that she drew her son to her, and gave him his good-night kiss, and went away quickly without turning round again. John was left master of the field. Neither father nor mother had any effectual forces to bring against him—they had both retired with a postponement of the question, which weakened their power and strengthened his. And he had attained what seemed to him the greatest happiness in life—the love of the girl whom he loved. And yet he was not happy. He walked slowly up and down the deserted room, and stood at the open window, and breathed in the breath of the lilies and the dew, and remembered that Kate was his, and yet was not happy. How incredible that was, and yet true! When he left the room he caught himself moving with stealthy footsteps, as if something lay dead in the house. And something did lie dead. The hopes that had centred in him had got their death-blow.

The house had lost what had been its heart and strength. He became vaguely, sadly conscious of this, as he stole away in the silence to his own room, and shut himself up there, though it was still so early, with his heart as heavy as lead within his breast.

CHAPTER XII.

NEXT morning the household met at breakfast with that strange determination to look just as usual, and ignore all that had happened, which is so common in life. Kate, to be sure, did not know what had happened. She was aware of nothing but her own engagement which could have disturbed the family calm ; and it filled her with wonder, and even irritation, to see how pale John looked, who ought to have been at the height of happiness, and how little exultation was in his voice. " He is thinking of what he is to say to papa," was the thought that passed through her mind ; and this thought fortunately checked her momentary displeasure. Mrs Mitford was paler still, and her eyes looked red, as if she had been crying ; but instead of being subdued or cross,

she was in unusually gay spirits, it seemed to Kate—talking a great deal more than usual, even laughing, and attempting little jokes which sat very strangely upon her. The only conclusion Kate could draw from the general aspect of affairs was that they were all extremely nervous about the meeting with Mr Crediton. And, on the whole, she was not very much surprised at this. She herself was nervous enough. His only child, for whom he might have hoped the most splendid of marriages—who was so much admired, and had so little excuse for throwing herself away—that she could engage herself thus, like any school-girl, to a clergyman's son, with no prospects, nor money, nor position, nor anything! Kate looked at John across the table, and saw that he was very far from handsome, and owned to herself that it was next to incredible. Why had she done it? Looking at him critically, he was not even the least good-looking, nor distinguished, nor remarkable in any way. One might say he had a good expression, but that was all that could be said for him. And Kate felt that it would be incred-

ible to her father. Dr Mitford was the only one of the party who was like himself; but then he was an old man, and naturally had not much feeling left.

“I want you to let me drive the phaeton over to the station to meet papa,” she said. “Please do, Dr Mitford. Oh, I am not in the least afraid of the pony. I have been making friends with him, and giving him lumps of sugar, and I do want to be the first to see papa.”

“My dear Miss Kate, I am so sorry the phaeton has only room for two,” said the Doctor. “If you were to go there would be no seat for your excellent father; but it is only half an hour’s drive—cannot you wait till he reaches here?”

“But, dear Dr Mitford, I always drive him from the station at home,” cried Kate.

“You are not at home now, my dear young lady,” said the Doctor, shaking his head. “We must give you back safe and sound into his hands. The groom will go. No, Miss Kate, no—we must not frighten your worthy father. You must consider what had so

nearly happened a month ago. No, no; it requires a man's hand——”

“But the pony is so gentle,” pleaded Kate.

“I know the pony better than you do,” Dr Mitford said, shaking his head, “and he wants a man's hand. My dear, you must be content to wait your good father here.”

The Doctor was the only one who appeared unmoved. He had put on all his usual decorous solemnity along with his fresh stiff white tie, and highly-polished creaking boots. But even he made no allusion to the changed state of affairs. Sometimes Kate felt as if she must laugh, sometimes as if she must cry, sometimes disposed to be angry, sometimes wounded. She was glad to escape from the table to the garden, where John found her—glad, poor fellow, to escape too. And then, as they wandered among the rose-bushes arm-in-arm, she found out how it was.

“But they have no right to be so hard on you,” cried Kate, impetuously. “Suppose you had never seen me or thought of me—would it be right to be a clergyman, just like

a trade, when you felt you could not in your heart——”

“My Kate!—you understand me at least; that is what I said.”

“And when you can do so much better for yourself,” said Kate, with emphasis. “Mrs Mitford and the Doctor should think of that. One way you never could have been anything but a clergyman; while the other way—why, you may be anything, John.”

He shook his head over her, half sadly, half pleased. He knew his capacities were far from being beyond limit, but still that she should think so was pleasant. And then there was the sense, which was sweet, that he and she, spending the summer morning among the flowers, were a little faction in arms against the world, with a mutual grievance, mutual difficulties, a cause to maintain against everybody. Solitude *à deux* is sweet, and selfishness *à deux* has a way of looking half sublime. It was the first time either of them had experienced this infinitely seductive sentiment. They talked over the hardness of the father and mother, with a kind of delight in

thus feeling all the world to be against them. "They cannot blame me, for you were thinking of that before you ever saw me," said Kate. "Blame you! it is one thing the more I have to love you for," said John. "I should never have been awakened to free myself but for you, my darling. I should have gone stupidly on under the sway of custom." And for the moment he believed what he said. Oh, what a difference it made! the wide world before him where to choose, and this creature, whom he loved more than all the world, leaning on him, putting her fate in his hands; instead of the dull routine of parish duties, and the dull home life, and the stagnation around, and all his uneasy restless thoughts.

It was about twelve o'clock when Kate went up-stairs to get her hat, with the intention of setting out on foot to waylay her father. It was absolutely indispensable, she felt, that she should be the first to see him; but up to that time the two lovers had wandered about together unmolested, not caring who saw them, arm-in-arm. This was the

first advantage of the engagement. Dr Mitford saw them from his library, and Mrs Mitford looked down upon them with a beating heart from her chamber-window, but neither interfered. Twenty-four hours before Mrs Mitford would have gone out herself to take care of them, or would have called Kate to her; but now that they were engaged, such precautions were vain. And other people saw them besides the father and mother. Fred Huntley, for instance, who reined in his horse, and peered over the garden-wall as he passed, with a curiosity he found it difficult to account for, saw them standing by the lilies leaning on each other, and said "Oh!" to himself, and turned back and rode home again, without giving the message he had been charged with. He had come to ask the Fanshawe Regis people to a garden-party—"But what is the use?" Fred had said to himself; and had turned, not his own head, but his horse's, and gone back again. Parsons, too, saw the pair from Kate's window, where she was finishing her packing. "Master will soon put a stop to that," was Parsons' decision. But everybody

perceived at once that a new relationship had been established between the two, and that everything was changed.

When Kate ran up-stairs to put on her hat, it was after two hours of this consultation and mutual confidence. It was true she had not taken much advice from him. She had closed his lips on that subject, telling him frankly that she knew her papa a great deal better than he did, and that she should take her own way; but she had given a great deal of counsel, on the other hand. He had found it impossible to do more than make a succession of little fond replies, so full had she been of advice and wisdom. "You must be, oh, so kind and gentle and nice to her," Kate had said. "I will never forgive you if you are in the least cross or disagreeable to mamma. Yes; I like to say mamma. I never had any mother of my own, and she has been so good to me, and I love her so—not for your sake, sir, but for her own. You must never be vexed by anything she says; you must be as patient and gentle and sweet to her—but, remember, you must be firm! It will be kindest to all

of us, John. If you were to appear to give in now, it would all have to be done over again ; now the subject has been started, it will be much kinder to be firm."

"You need not fear in that respect," John replied. "I think nothing but the thought of you up-stairs, and the feeling that you understood me, would have given me courage to speak ; but the moment one word had been said, all had been said. Nothing can bring things back to their old condition again."

"I am so glad," said Kate ; "but, remember, you must be gentleness itself to *her*. If you were rude or undutiful or unkind, I should never, never look at you again."

"My darling !" said John. It was so sweet of her thus to defend his mother. If Mrs Mitford had heard it, her soft heart would have been filled full of disgust and bitterness to think of this stranger taking it upon herself to plead for her, his mother, with her own son ! But John only thought how sweet it was of his darling to be so anxious for his mother, and felt his heart melt over her. What was all his

mother had done for him in comparison with Kate's dominion, which was boundless, and of divine right? Thus they discussed their position, the very difficulties of which were delicious because they were mutual, and felt that the other persons connected with them, parents and suchlike, were railed off at an immense distance, and were henceforward to be struggled against and kept in subjection. It was with this resolution full in her mind, and thrilling with a new impulse of independence and activity, that Kate went up-stairs. Parsons had gone down to seek that sustenance of failing nature which the domestic mind finds necessary between its eight o'clock breakfast and its two o'clock dinner; but Lizzie, whom Kate had seen but little of lately, inspired on her side by a resolution scarcely less strong than the young lady's, was at her bedroom door, waylaying her. Lizzie rushed in officiously to find the hat and the gloves and the parasol which Miss Crediton wanted, and then she added, humbly, "Please, miss!" and stood gaping, with her wholesome country roses growing crimson, and the creamy white of her

round neck reddening all over, like sunrise upon snow.

“Well, Lizzie, what is it?—but make haste, for I am in a hurry,” said Kate. She was a young lady who was very good-natured to servants, and, as they said, not a bit proud.

“Oh, please, miss!—it’s as I can’t a-bear to see you going away.”

“Is that all? I am sure it is very kind of you, Lizzie—everybody has been so very kind to me at Fanshawe Regis that I can’t bear to go away,” said Kate; “but I daresay I shall come back again—probably very often; so you see it is not worth while to cry.”

“That’s not the reason, miss,” said Lizzie; “I’ve been thinking this long and long if I could better myself. Mother’s but poor, miss, and all them big lads to think of. And you as has so many servants, and could do such a deal——It aint as I’m not happy with missis—but service is service, and I feel as I ought to better myself——.”

“Oh, you ungrateful thing!” cried Kate; “after Mrs Mitford has been so good to you. I would not be so ungrateful for all the world.

Better yourself indeed ! I can tell you, you are a great deal more likely to injure yourself. Oh, Lizzie, I should not have thought it of you ! You ought to be so happy here."

"It aint as I'm not happy," cried Lizzie, melting into tears. "Oh, miss, don't you go and be vexed. It's all along of what Miss Parsons says. She says in the kitchen as how she's going to be married, and all the dresses you gives her, and all the presents, and takes her about wherever you go. Oh, miss, when Miss Parsons is married, won't you try me ? I'll serve you night and day—I will. I don't mind sitting up nights—not till daylight—and I'd never ask for holidays, nor followers, nor nothing. You'd have a faithful servant, though I says it as shouldn't," said Lizzie, with her apron at her eyes ; "and mother's prayers, and a blessin' from the Lord—oh, miss, if you'd try me !"

"Try you in place of Parsons !" cried Kate, in consternation. "Why, Lizzie, are you mad ? Can you make dresses, you foolish girl, and dress hair, and do all sorts of things, like Parsons ? You are only Mrs Mitford's housemaid.

Do you mean to tell me you can do all that too ?”

“I could try, miss,” said Lizzie, somewhat frightened, drying her eyes.

“Try !—to make me a dress !” cried Kate, her eyes dancing with fun and comic horror. “But, Lizzie, I will try and find a place for you as housemaid, if you like.”

“I don’t care for that, miss,” said Lizzie, disconsolately ; “what I want is to better myself. And I know I could, if I were to try. When I’ve tried hard at anything, I’ve allays done it. And, please, I don’t know what Miss Parsons is, as she should be thought that much of—I could do it if I was to try.”

“Then you had better try, I think,” said Kate, with severe politeness, “and let me know when you have succeeded ; but in the mean time I will take my gloves, which you are spoiling. I have no more time to talk just now.”

Poor Lizzie found herself left behind, when she had hoped the argument was just beginning. Kate ran down with her gloves in her hand, half annoyed, half amused. The girl

was so ready to transplant herself anywhere—to reach out her rash hands to new tools, and to take upon her a succession of unknown duties, that Kate was quite subdued by the thought. “How foolish!” she said to herself. “When she has been brought up to one thing, why should she want to try another? It is so silly. What stupid servants are! If I had been brought up a housemaid, I should have remained a housemaid. And to be willing to leave her good mistress and her home and all her past life—for what?” said Kate, moralising. Had she but known what a very similar strain of reasoning was going on in Mrs Mitford’s mind! “To give up his home, and all his associations, and his prospects in life, and the work God had provided for him—for what?” John’s mother was musing. The school, and the old women in the village, and all her parish work, had slid out of her thoughts. She had shut herself up in her own room, and was brooding over it—working the sword in her wound, and now and then crying out with the pain. And Dr Mitford in his study paused from time to time in the midst

of his paper, and wished with a glum countenance that Mr Crediton's visit was well over, and made up little speeches disowning all complicity in the business ; and John had gone down to the river, to the foot of those cliffs where Kate's horse was carrying her when he saved her, and, with his fishing-rod idle in his hand, tried also to prepare himself for that awful interview with Kate's father, and for the final argument with his own which must follow. He was in the first day of his lover's paradise, and had just tasted the sweetness of mutual consultation over those interests and prospects which were now hers as well as his. And he was very happy. But all the same he was wretched, feeling himself torn asunder from his life—feeling that he had lost all independent standing, and had alienated the hearts which loved him most in the world. All this followed upon the privilege of saving Miss Crediton's life, and her month's residence at Fanshawe Regis. Was it Kate's fault ? Nobody said so in words, not even Mrs Mitford ; and Kate went to meet her father with such a sense of splendid virtue and dis-

interestedness as never before had swelled her bosom. She was full of the energy and exhilaration which attends the doing of a good action. "I have saved him," she said to herself, "as he saved me. I have prevented him going and making a sacrifice of himself. He would never have had the courage to stand up for himself without me." Moved by this glow of delightful complacency, she set out upon the road to the station; and it was not till she heard the jingle of the phaeton in the distance that a thrill of nervousness ran over Kate, and she felt the magnitude and importance of what she was about to do.

Mr Crediton probably was thinking of quite other things—at least, he did not recognise her, though she stood against the green hedgerow in her light summer dress, making signs with her parasol. It was only when the groom drew up that he observed the pretty figure by the roadside. "What, Kate!" he cried, with a flush of pleasure, and jumped out of the phaeton to greet her. "But there is no room for another," he said, looking comically at the respectable vehicle, when he had

kissed his child, and congratulated her on her improved looks—"what is to be done?"

"I wanted to have driven the pony to the station," said Kate, "but Dr Mitford would not let me. Now you must walk home with me, papa—it is not a mile. James, you may drive on, and say we are coming. Dr Mitford thought the pony would be too much for me," she added, demurely. "He is so funny, and so precise about everything." Then Kate remembered suddenly that it was very contrary to her interest to depreciate any of the Mitford family, and changed her tone—"but so nice—you cannot think, papa, how kind, how good they have all been to me: they have made me like their own child."

"So much the better, my dear," said Mr Crediton. "I am very grateful to them. I am sure they are very good sort of people. But I hope, Kate, you are not sorry to be going home?"

"I am not sorry to see *you*, papa," cried Kate, clasping his arm with both her hands. And then she leaned her head towards him in her caressing way. "Dear papa! I have so

much to tell you," she went on, faltering in spite of herself.

"If you have much to tell me, you must have used your time well," said Mr Crediton, smiling upon her the smile of fond paternal indulgence. "And I daresay the items are not very important. But you have got back your roses and your bright eyes, my pet, and that is of more consequence than all the news in the world."

"Papa," said Kate, moved to a certain solemnity, "you would not say so if you knew what I am going to say. Do you remember what you said to me the morning you left? and I thought it was such nonsense;—but," here she gave his arm a tender little squeeze between her two clinging hands, "I suppose it was you that knew best."

"What did I say to you the morning I left?" said Mr Crediton, quite unsuspecting. He was pleased she should remember, pleased she should think he knew best. But he could scarcely realise his saucy Kate in this soft adoring creature, and he put his own hand caressingly upon the two little hands. "Mrs Mit-

ford must have done you a great deal of good," he added, with a soft laugh; "you did not use to be quite so retentive of what I said."

"Oh, but papa, if you would only remember!" said Kate. "Papa," she resumed, faltering, and drooping her head, "it came true—all your warning about—John."

Mr Crediton gave a start, as if he had been shot. "About—John. What does this mean?" he cried, becoming alarmed. "What is it? I remember most things that concern you, but I don't recollect anything particular I said."

"Yes, papa; you warned me about—John. But it has not quite come true," she added, lowering her voice, and leaning on him, with her head against his arm; "or rather, it has come more than true. Papa, don't be angry. I came out on purpose to tell you. They are in a dreadful state about it. It is making poor Mrs Mitford quite ill. She thinks you will think they had some hand in it, but indeed they had not. Papa, dear, promise me you will not be angry. I—I am—engaged—to John."

Mr Crediton was a very decorous, respectable man, not addicted to outbursts of passion,

but at this wonderful announcement he swore a prodigious oath, and drew his arm away from her, giving her unawares a thrust aside which made her reel. Kate was so bewildered, so frightened, so dismayed by this personal touch that she blushed crimson the one moment, and the next began to cry. She stood gazing at him, with the big tears dropping, and the most piteous look in her eyes. "Oh, papa, don't kill me!" she cried, in her consternation, sinking into the very hedge, in horror of his violence. Mr Crediton was so excited that he paid no attention to her cry of terror. "The d—d scoundrel!" he cried. "What! come in like this behind my back and rob me—take advantage of my sense of obligation—curse him! Curse them all! That's your pious people!" And the man raved and blasphemed for five minutes at least, as if he had been his own groom, and not a respectable gentleman with grey hairs on his head, and the cares of half the county in his hands.

All this time Kate was too frightened to speak; but she was not the kind of girl to be long overwhelmed by such a fit of passion.

She shrank back farther into the hedge, and grew as white as her dress, and trembled a good deal, and could not utter a word. But gradually her courage returned to her. Her heart began to thump less wildly against her breast, but rose and swelled instead with a force which was half self-will and half a generous sense of injustice. When Mr Crediton came to himself—which he did all at once with some very big words in his mouth, and his hand clenched in the air, and his face blazing with fury—he stopped short all at once, and cast an alarmed look at his daughter. Good heavens! he, a respectable man, to utter such exclamations, and in Kate's presence! He came to himself all in a moment, and metaphorically fell prostrate before her with confusion and shame.

“Well,” he said, half fiercely, half humbly, “it is not much wonder if a man should forget himself. How do you dare to stand there and face me, and put such a thing into words?”

“Papa, I am very much surprised,” said Kate, her courage rising to the occasion. “I

could not have believed it. It is best it should be me, and not a stranger, for what would any stranger have thought? But all the same, I am very sorry that it was me. I shall never be able to forget that I saw you look like that, and heard you say—— Ah!” said Kate, shutting her eyes. He thought she was going to faint, and got very much frightened; but nothing could be further from Kate’s mind than any intention of fainting. She sat down, however, on the grass, and leaned her elbows on her knees, and hid her face in her hands. And the unhappy father, conscious of having so horribly committed himself, stood silent, and did not know what to say.

Then, after a moment, she raised her head and looked him in the face. “Papa,” she said, “the people you have been abusing are waiting over there to welcome you to their house. They don’t like your coming, because they have a feeling what will happen; and they are very very vexed with their son for falling in love with me; and, poor fellow! I think he is vexed with himself, though he could not help it. What are you going to do? Are you

going to swear at Dr Mitford, whose son saved your only child's life, and whose wife saved it over again by her kindness, because they love me now as well? Are you going to drive me mad, and make me that I don't care what I do? I am not so good as John is," she said, with a half-sob; "if you cross me I will not be humble. I will go wrong, and make him go wrong too. You cannot change my mind by swearing at *me*, papa. What are you going to do?"

Yes, that was the question. It was very easy to storm and swear, with nobody present but his daughter. But Dr Mitford was as good a man as Mr Crediton, and as well known in the county, though he was not so rich. And John had saved Kate's life at the risk of his own; and she had been taken in, and nursed, and brought back to perfect health; and there was no single house in the world to which Mr Crediton lay under such a weight of obligations. Was he to turn his back upon the house, and ignore all gratitude? Was he to go and insult them, or what was he to do? He was very angry, furious with Kate

and her bold words, yet cowed by her in a way most wonderful to behold. "We had better walk back to the station; you are able enough for that, or at least you look so," he said.

"That will show how highly you esteem my life," said Kate, "though even that would be better than insulting them to their face."

"By Jove!" said Mr Crediton, under his breath; and he took a few rapid turns up and down the road, with a perplexity which it would be impossible to describe. At last he came to a stop opposite Kate, who was watching him anxiously, without appearing to take any notice; and she felt that the fit was over. He came back to her very sternly, speaking with none of its usual softness in his voice.

"Kate," he said, "you have spoken in a very unpardonable, very impertinent, way to me, but perhaps I have been wrong too. Of course I am not going to transgress the laws of civility. My opinion is not changed, but I hope I can be civil to my worst enemy. Get up, and let us go to the Rectory; it is the only thing we can do."

Kate rose without a word, and put her hand

upon her father's arm, and the two stalked into Fanshawe Regis like two mutes following a funeral. They neither looked at each other, nor uttered a syllable to each other, but walked on side by side, feeling as if mutual hatred, and not love, was the bond between them. But yet in her inmost heart Kate felt that nothing was lost. The communication had been made, and the worst was over—perhaps even something had been gained.

CHAPTER XIII.

IT was perhaps well, on the whole, for the comfort of all the party, that Mr Crediton had behaved so very badly on the first announcement of this news. His self-betrayal put him on his guard. It recalled him to a sense of needful restraint, and that the Mitfords were not, after all, people to be treated with contempt. He was very serious and somewhat stiff during the luncheon, which was sufficiently trying to all the party, but he was not uncivil. Of John he took no notice at all after the first formal recognition, but to Mrs Mitford and the Doctor he was studiously polite, making them little speeches of formal gratitude. "I find my child perfectly recovered, thanks to your kind care," he said. "I can never sufficiently express my deep sense of obligation to you."

This speech called up an angry flush on John's cheek, but not a word was spoken by any of the party to imply that there was any stronger bond than that of kindness between Kate and the people who had been so good to her. The two young people were made to feel that they were secondary altogether. The thoughts of their elders might, indeed, be occupied about them, but they themselves were struck out of the front of the action, and relegated to their natural place. Mr Crediton carried this so far that, when luncheon was over, he turned to Dr Mitford and asked to speak with him, altogether ignoring the existence of Dr Mitford's son. But John had risen, and had taken matters into his own hands.

"May I ask you to see me first, Mr Crediton?" he said. "There are some things of which I am most anxious to speak to you at once."

Mr Crediton rose too, and made John a little formal bow. "I am at your service," he said; and Dr Mitford stood up, looking somewhat scared, and listened; no doubt feeling himself, in his turn, thrust aside.

“I must not interfere,” he said, with a kind of ghastly smile, “and I take no responsibility in what my son is going to say ; but if you will both come to my library——”

“I should prefer speaking to Mr Crediton alone,” said John. And then it seemed that his father shrank like a polite ghost, and gave way to the real hero of the situation. Mrs Mitford shrank too, joining in her husband’s involuntary gesture ; and John marched boldly out, leading the way, while Mr Crediton followed, and the Doctor went after them, shrugging his shoulders with a faint assumption of indifference. It seemed as if some magician had waved a wand, and the three gentlemen disappeared out of the room, leaving Mrs Mitford and Kate looking at each other. And there they sat half stupefied, with their hearts beating, till Jervis came in to clear the table, and looked at them as a good servant looks, with suspicious watchful eyes, as if to say, What is it all about, and what do you mean by it, sitting there after your meal is over, and giving yourselves up to untimely agitations, disturbing Me ? Mrs Mitford obeyed that

look as a well-brought-up woman always does. She said, "Come, Kate! what can you and I be thinking of?" and led the way into the drawing-room. She did this with an assumption of liveliness and light-heartedness which was overdoing her part. "We need not take the servants into our confidence, at least," she said, sitting down by her work-table, and taking out her knitting as usual. But it was a very tremulous business, and soon the needles dropped upon her knee. Kate, too, attempted to resume the piece of worsted work she had been doing, and to look as if nothing had happened; but her attempt was even more futile. When they had sat in this way silent for some five minutes, the girl's agitation got the better of her. She threw the work aside, and ran and threw herself at Mrs Mitford's feet. "Oh, mamma, say something to me!" she cried; "I feel as if I could not breathe. And I never had any mother of my own."

Then John's mother lost the composure for which she had been struggling. Her heart was not softened to Kate personally at that

climax of all the trouble which Kate had brought upon her, but she could not resist such an appeal; and she too could scarcely breathe, and wanted companionship in her trouble. It was hard to take into her heart the girl who was the occasion of it all; but yet Kate was suffering too. Mrs Mitford fell a-crying, which was the first natural expression of her feelings, and then she laid her hand softly on Kate's head, and by degrees allowed herself to be taken possession of. They were just beginning to talk to each other, to open their hearts, and enter into all those mutual explanations which women love, when Kate's quick youthful eyes caught sight of two black figures in the distance among the trees on the other side of the blazing summer lawn. She broke off in the middle of a sentence, and gave a low cry, and clutched at Mrs Mitford's gown. "They are there!" cried Kate, with a gasp of indescribable suspense. And Mrs Mitford, when she saw them, began to cry softly again.

"Oh, what is he saying to my boy?" cried the agitated woman, wringing her hands. To

see the discussion going on before their eyes gave the last touch of the intolerable to their anxiety.

“ Oh, Kate, I am a bad woman ! ” said Mrs Mitford ; “ I could hate you, and I could hate your father, for bringing all this trouble on my John.”

“ I don’t wonder,” cried Kate, in her passion ; and then she made an effort to conquer herself. “ Papa cannot eat him,” she added, with a little harsh laugh of emotion. “ I have had the worst of it. He will never say to John what he said to me.”

“ What did he say to you ? ”

“ Oh, nothing ! ” she cried, recollecting herself. “ He is my own papa ; he has a right to say what he likes to me. It is John who is speaking now—that is a good sign. And when he chooses, and takes the trouble, John can speak so well ; he is so clever. I never meant to have let him do all this, and give everybody so much trouble ; but when he began to talk like *that*, what was I to do ? ”

“ Oh, Kate ! ” cried the mother, with her eyes full of tears, “ we are so selfish—we never

thought of that ! How were you to resist him more than the rest of us ? My dear boy—he had always such a winning way ! ”

“ John is speaking still,” said Kate. “ Mamma, I think things must be coming round. There—papa has put his hand on his arm. When he does that he is beginning to give in. Oh, if we could only hear what they say ! ”

“ He is so earnest in all he does,” said Mrs Mitford. “ Kate ! listen to what I am going to say to you. If this ever comes to anything——”

“ Of course it will come to something,” cried Kate. “ I am not so good as John. If papa were to stand out, I should just wait till I was one-and-twenty ; and then, if John pleased—— Now they are turning back again. Oh, will they never be done ? It is just like men, walking and talking, walking and talking for ever, and us poor women waiting here.”

“ But, Kate, listen to me,” said Mrs Mitford, solemnly ; “ if it ever comes to anything, you must be very very careful with my John.

Look at his dear face, how it shines with feeling! He loves you so—he would put himself under your father's feet. I feel as if I could tell you the very words he is saying. And you—you have been brought up so differently. If you were tempted to be careless, and forget his ways of thinking, and prefer society and the world——”

“I see how it is,” said Kate, with a mournful cadence in her voice—she did not turn her head, for her eyes were still intently fixed on the distant figures out of doors; “I see how it is—you don't think I am the right girl for John.”

“I did not say so,” said Mrs Mitford, humbly; “how can I tell? I can't divine what is in my own boy's heart, and how can I divine yours? But I will love you for his sake. Oh, Kate! if you are good to him——”

Here the conversation came to a sudden pause; for the two who were outside were seen to turn in the direction of Dr Mitford's study, and to enter the house, which made the crisis come nearer, as it were. Neither of the

two ladies could have told how the afternoon passed. Every sound that went through the house seemed to them significant. Sometimes a door would open or shut, and paralyse them for the moment. Sometimes a sound as of a single step would be heard in one of the passages, and then Mrs Mitford and Kate would rise up and flush crimson, and listen as if they had not been listening all the time. "Now they are coming!" one or the other would say, with a gasp, for the waiting affected their very breathing. Except on these occasions, they scarcely exchanged two words in half an hour. From time to time Kate looked at her watch, and made a remark under her breath about the hour. "It is too late for the four o'clock train," she said; and then it was too late for the mail at half-past five; and all this time not a word came out of the stillness to relieve their anxiety. The bees buzzed about the garden, and the sun shone and shone as if he never could weary of shining, and blazed across the monotonous lawn and vacant paths, which no step or shadow disturbed. Oh the burden of the silence that lay upon that whole smil-

ing world outside, where not even a leaf would move, so eager was nature to have the first word of the secret! When Mrs Mitford's needles clicked in her tremulousness, Kate glanced up with eyes of feverish reproach; and when Kate's scissors fell, the room echoed with the sound, and Mrs Mitford felt it an injury. Thus the long, weary, languid afternoon passed on. When Jervis began to stir with his preparations for dinner, and to move about his pantry, with clink and clang of glass and silver, laying the table, the sounds were to them like the return of a jury into their box to the anxious wretches waiting for their verdict. Dinner was coming, that augustest of modern ceremonies, and the ladies felt instinctively that things must now come to a decision. And accordingly, it was just after Jervis had carried his echoing tray out of the pantry to the sideboard when the door of the study at last opened, and steps were heard coming along the passage—Dr Mitford's steps, creaking as they came, and another footstep, which Kate knew to be her father's. Not John! The ladies sat bolt upright, and grew

red and grew pale, and felt the blood tingle to their finger-points. And then they looked at each other, and asked, silently, "Where has he gone?"

This time it was no longer the jurymen. It was the judge himself, coming solemn with his verdict. The gentlemen came into the room one behind the other, Mr Crediton looking worn and tired, and even Dr Mitford's white tie grown limp with suspense and emotion. But it was he who was the first to speak.

"I am sorry to have left you so long by yourselves," he said, with a little air of attempted jauntiness, which sat very strangely on him, "and to have kept Mr Crediton away from you; but we had a great deal to talk over, and business, you know, must be attended to. My dear, it was business of a very momentous kind. And now, Miss Kate," said the Rector, turning upon her, and holding out both his hands—he smiled, but his smile was very limp, like his tie, and even his hands, though not expressive generally, trembled a little—"now, Miss Kate, for the first time I

feel at liberty to speak to you. You must have thought me very hard and cold the other night; but now I have your father's permission to bid you welcome to my family," Dr Mitford went on, smiling a ghastly smile; and he stooped over her and kissed her forehead, and held her hands, waving them up and down as if he did not know what to do with them. "I don't know why my son has not come to be the first to tell you. Everything is settled at last!"

"Where is John?" cried Mrs Mitford, with her soft cheeks blazing. And her husband dropped Kate's hands as if they had burned him, and they all paused and looked at each other with an embarrassment and restraint which nobody could disguise.

"To do him justice, I don't think he felt himself equal to a grand tableau of family union and rapture," said Mr Crediton. "Mrs Mitford, I don't pretend to be overjoyed. I don't see why we should make any pretences about it. They have done a very foolish thing, and probably they will repent of it——"

But this was more than John's mother could

bear. "One of them, I am sure, will never have any reason to repent of it," she said, with irrepressible heat, not thinking of the double meaning that her words might bear.

"I hope it may be so," Mr Crediton said, and shook his head. And there was again a silence, and Kate sat with all her veins swelling as if they would burst, and her heart beating in her very throat, and nobody taking any further notice of her. What was it to any of them in comparison with what it was to her? and yet nobody even looked at her. It seemed so utterly incredible, that for the moment she was stunned and dumb, and capable of nothing but amazement.

"No," said her father again, after a pause; "I don't pretend to be overjoyed. We have had a great deal of talk, and the talk has not been agreeable. And, Mrs Mitford, if I am to judge by your looks, I should say you were no more happy at the thought of losing your son than I am at that of losing my daughter—in so foolish a way."

"Let us hope it may turn out better than we think," said Dr Mitford; and then came

the inevitable pause, which made every sentence sound so harsh and clear.

“There is certainly room for the hope,” said Mr Crediton; “fortunately it must be a long time before anything comes of it. Your son seems to have quite relinquished the thought of going into the Church.”

“Have you settled that too?—is it all decided? Oh, Dr Mitford, you have been hasty with him!” cried John’s mother. “I told you if you would but take time enough, and go into things with him, and explain——”

“I don’t think explaining would have done much good,” said Mr Crediton. “It rarely does, when a young fellow has got such an idea into his head. The only thing is, that when a boy changes once he may change twice—when he is older, and this fever-fit, perhaps, may be over——”

“Oh, can you sit and hear this?” cried Kate, springing to her feet. “Oh, papa, how can you be so wicked and so rude? Do you think John is like that—to take a fancy and give it over? And you are his mother, and

know him best, and you leave him to be defended by me!"

"Kate, my dear!" cried Mrs Mitford, hastening to her, "you make me hate myself. You understand my boy—you stand up for him when his own flesh and blood is silent. And I love you with all my heart! And I will never, never grudge him to you again!"

And the two women rushed into each other's arms, and clung together in a passion of tears and mutual consolation; while the men, for their part, looked grimly on, vanquished, yet finding a certain satisfaction in their sense of superiority to any such folly. Mr Crediton sat down, with the hard unsympathetic self-possession of a man who has still a blow to deliver; and poor Dr Mitford walked up and down the room, aware of what was yet to come. But in the mean time the victims over whom the stroke was lowering had delivered themselves all at once from their special misery. The ice had broken between them. John, who had divided them, became all at once their bond of union. "Mamma, if you will stand by me I can do anything," Kate whispered, with her

lips upon Mrs Mitford's cheek. "My own child!" John's mother whispered in reply; and thus the treaty was made which was to set all other diplomacies at nought.

"I think it is a great pity," said Mr Crediton again, "but of course, in the turn that circumstances have taken, I must help him as best I can. It is not very much I can do, for you are aware when a young man changes his profession all in a minute, it is a difficult thing to provide for him. And he did not seem to have any clear idea what to do with himself. Probably you will feel it is not equal to your son's pretensions, Mrs Mitford—but I have offered him a clerkship in my bank."

"A clerkship in your bank!" cried Mrs Mitford, petrified. She withdrew a little from Kate in her consternation, and sat down and gazed, trying to take in and understand this extraordinary piece of news.

"Papa, you cannot mean it," cried Kate, vehemently. "Oh, are you papa, or somebody come to mock us? A clerkship in the bank—for Dr Mitford's son—for—John!"

"John is no doubt possessed of many attrac-

tions," said Mr Crediton, in his hardest tones, "but I am only an ordinary mortal, and I cannot make him Prime Minister. When a man throws himself out of his proper occupation, he must take what he can get. And he has accepted my offer, Kate. He is not so high-flown as you are; and I can assure you a man may do worse than be a clerk in my bank."

"It is a most honourable introduction to commerce," said Dr Mitford, coming forward very limp and conciliatory; "and commerce, as I have often said, is the great power of the nineteenth century. My dear, it is not what we expected—of course it is very different from what we expected; but if *I* put up with it—— It cannot be such a disappointment to you as it is to me."

Mrs Mitford turned away with an impatient cry. Her very sense of decorum failed her. Though she had kept up the tradition of her husband's superiority so long that she actually believed in it, yet on this point he was not superior. She was driven even out of politeness, the last stronghold of a well-bred woman.

She could not be civil to the man who had thus outraged her pride and all her hopes. She sat and moaned and rocked herself, saying, "My boy! my boy!" in a voice of despair.

"He is saying it only to try us," cried Kate. "He is not cruel. Papa, you have always been so good to me! Oh, he does not mean it. It is only—some frightful—joke or other. Papa, you don't mean what you say?"

"I do mean what I say," said Mr Crediton, abruptly; "and when I say so, I think I may congratulate both Mrs Mitford and myself that, whatever foolish thing our children may make up their minds to do, they cannot do it very soon. We have had enough of this nonsense for the present, Kate. Dr Mitford is so kind as to ask us to stop for dinner. We must wait now for the nine o'clock train."

And just then Jervis, curious but unenlightened, rang the first bell. And what are all the passions and all the struggles of the heart compared to Dinner, invincible potentate? Mrs Mitford and Kate gathered themselves together meekly at the sound of that

summons. Against it they did not dare to remonstrate. They gave each other a silent kiss as they parted at the door of Kate's room, but they could not resist nor trifle with such a stern necessity. "Where was John?" they asked themselves, as each stood before her glass, trying as best she could to clear away the trace of tears, and to hide from their own eyes and from the sharp eyes of the servants all signs of the crisis they had been going through. Kate had to retain her morning dress, as she had still a journey before her; but she was elaborate about her hair, by way of demonstrating her self-possession. "Papa has put off till the nine o'clock train; and it is so tiresome of him, making one go down to dinner like a fright," she said to Parsons, trying to throw dust in the eyes of that astute young woman. As if Parsons did not know!

As for John, he had been wandering about stupefied ever since that amazing conclusion had been come to, in such a state of confusion that he could not realise what had happened. Kate was to be his. That was the great matter which had been decided upon. But

notwithstanding his passionate love for Kate, this was not what bulked largest in his mind. The world somehow had turned a somersault with him, and he could not make out whether he had lighted on solid earth again, or was still whirling in the dizzy air. His past life had all shrivelled away from him as if it had never been. His sensations were those of a man who has rolled over some tremendous precipice ; or who wakes out of a swoon to find himself lying on some battle-field. He was very sore and battered and beaten, tingling all over with bruises ; and the relative position of the world, and everything in it, to himself was changed. It might be the same sky and the same soil to others, but to him everything was different. Kate was to be his ; but that was in the future. And for the present he was to begin life, not in any noble way for the service of others, but as a clerk in Mr Crediton's bank.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR CREDITON'S bank was in the High Street of Camelford—a low-roofed, rather shabby-looking office, with dingy old desks and counters, at which the clerks sat about in corners, all visible to the public, and liable to constant distraction. The windows were never cleaned, on principle, and there were some iron bars across the lower half of them. Mr Crediton's own room was inside—you had to pass through the office to reach it; and the banker, when he chose to open his door, was visible to the clerks and the public at the end of the dingy vista, just as the clerks, and the public entering at the swing-door, and sometimes the street outside, were to him. The office was a kind of lean-to to the house, which was much loftier, more imposing, and stately; and Mr Crediton's

room communicated with his dwelling by a dark passage. The whole edifice was red brick, and recalled the age of the early Georges, or even of their predecessor Anne—a time when men were not ashamed of their business, but at the same time did it unpretendingly, and had no need during office hours of gilding or plate-glass. The house had a flight of steps up to it almost as high as the top of the office windows, and a big iron horn to extinguish links, and other traces of a moderate antiquity. Up to these steps Kate Crediton's horse would be led day after day, or her carriage draw up, in very sight of the clerks behind their murky windows. They kept their noses over their desks all day, in order that a butterfly creature, in all the brilliant colours of her kind, might flutter out and in in the sunshine, and take her pleasure. That was perhaps what some of them thought. But, to tell the truth, I don't believe many of them thought so. Even Mr Whichelo, the head clerk, whose children were often ailing, and who had a good deal of trouble to make both ends meet, smiled benign upon Kate. Had she been her own mother, it

might have been different ; but she was a creature of nineteen, and everybody felt it was natural. The clerks, with their noses at the grindstone, and her father sombre in the dingy room, working hard too in his way—all to keep up the high-stepping horses, the shining harness, the silks and velvets, and the high supremacy of that thing like a rosebud who sat princess among them,—after all, was it not quite natural ? What is the good of the stem but to carry, and of the leaves and thorns but to protect, the flower ?

But it may be supposed that John Mitford's feelings would be of a very strange description when he found himself dropped down in Mr Crediton's office, as if he had dropped from the skies. He was the junior clerk, and did not know the business, and his perch was behind backs, not far from one of the windows from which he could see all Kate's exits and entrances. He saw the public, too, coming and going, the swing-door flashing back and forward all day long, and on Saturdays and market-days caught sometimes the wondering glances of country folks who knew him. He

sat like a man in a dream, while all these things went on around him. How his life had changed ! What had brought him here ? what was to come of it ? were questions which glided dreamily through John's brain from time to time, but he could give no answer to them. He was here instead of at Fanshawe Regis ; instead of serving the world and his generation, as he had expected to do, he was junior clerk in a banker's office, entering dreary lines of figures into dreary columns. How had it all come about ? John was stupefied by the fall and by the surprise, and all the overwhelming dreary novelty ; and accordingly he sat the day through at first, and did what he was told to do with a certain apathy beyond power of thinking ; but that was a state of mind, of course, which could not last for ever. Yet even when that apathy was broken, the feeling of surprise continued to surmount all other feelings. He had taken this strange step, as he supposed, by his own will ; nobody had forced or even persuaded him. It was his own voluntary doing ; and yet how was it ? This question floated constantly, without any power

on his part to answer it, about his uneasy brain.

He was close to Kate, sitting writing all day long under a roof adjoining the very roof that sheltered her, with herself before his eyes every day. For he could not help but see her as she went out and in. But still it was doubtful whether there was much comfort in those glimpses of her. Mr Credition had not been unkind to him; but he had never pretended, of course, to be deeply delighted with the unexpected choice which his daughter had made. "If I consent to Kate's engagement with you," he had said, "it must be upon my own conditions. It is likely to be a long time before you can marry, and I cannot have a perpetual philandering going on before my eyes. She might like it, perhaps, for that is just one of the points upon which girls have no feeling; but you may depend upon it, it would be very bad for you, and I should not submit to it for a moment. I don't mean to say that you are not to see her, but it must be only at stipulated times. Thus far, at least, I must have my own way." John had acquiesced in this ar-

rangement without much resistance. It had seemed to him reasonable, comprehensible. Perpetual philandering certainly would not do. He had to work—to acquire a new trade foreign to all his previous thoughts and education—to put himself in the way of making money and providing for his wife; and he too could see as well as her father that to be following her about everywhere, and interrupting the common business of life by idle love-making, however beatific it might be, was simply impossible. To be able to look forward now and then to the delight of her presence—to make milestones upon his way of the times in which he should be permitted to see her, and sun himself in her eyes,—with that solace by the way, John thought the time would pass as the time passed to Jacob—as one day; and he accordingly assented, almost without reluctance.

But he did not know when he consented thus to the father's conditions that Kate would be flashing before him constantly under an aspect so different from that in which he had known her. The engagement, though it

made such an overwhelming difference to him, made little difference to Kate. She had come home to resume her usual life—a life not like anything that was familiar to him. Poor John had never known much about young ladies. He had never become practically aware of the place which amusement holds in such conditions of existence—how, in fact, it becomes the framework of life round which graver matters gather and entwine themselves; and it was a long time before he fully made the discovery, if, indeed, he did ever make it. Society could scarcely be said to exist in Fanshawe Regis; and those perpetual ridings and drivings and expeditions here and there—those dinners and dances—those afternoon assemblages—the music and the chatter, the *va et vient*, the continual flutter and movement, confounded the young man. He tried to be glad at first that she had so much gaiety, and felt very sorry for himself, who was shut out from all share in it. And then he got a little puzzled and perplexed. Did this sort of thing go on for ever? Was there never to be any break in it? Kate herself

unconsciously unfolded to him its perennial character without the remotest idea of the amazement she was exciting in his mind. So far as John's experience went, a dance, or even a dinner-party, or a croquet-party, or a picnic, were periodical delights which came at long intervals ; but they were the common occupations of life to Kate. He felt that he could have lived and worked like Jacob for twice seven years, had his love been living such a life as Rachel did by his side—going out with the flocks, tending the lambs, drawing water at the fountain, smiling shy and sweet at him from the tent-door. These were the terms in which his imagination put it. Had he seen Kate trip by the window as his mother did with her little basket, or trip back again with a book, after his own ideal of existence, his heart would have blessed her as she passed, and he himself would have returned to his ledger and worked twice as hard, and learned his duties twice as quickly ; but to see her flash away from the door amid a cavalcade of unknown riders—to see her put into her carriage by some man whom he longed to

kick on the spot—to watch her out of sight going into scenes where his imagination could not follow her, was very hard upon John. And thus to see her every day, and yet never, except once a-week or so, exchange words with her! Against his will, and in spite of all his exertions, this sense of her continual presence, and of her unknown friends, and life which was so close to him, and yet so far from him, absorbed his mind. When he should have been working his office work he was thinking where could she have gone to-day? When he ought to have been awakening to the interests of the bank, he was brooding with a certain sulkiness quite unnatural to him over the question, who that man could be who put her on her horse? It is impossible to describe how all this hindered and hampered him, and what a chaos it made of his life.

And even Kate herself found it very different from what she had anticipated. She sent in a servant for him several times at first; and once, when she had some little errand in the town, had the audacity to walk into the bank in her proper person and call

her lover from his desk. "Please tell Mr Mitford I want him," she said, looking Mr Whichelo full in the face, with an angelical blush and smile; and when he came to her, Kate turned to him before all the clerks, who were watching with a curiosity which may be imagined. "Oh John," she said, "come with me as far as Paterson's. It is market-day, and I don't like to walk alone." Of course he went, though he had his work to do. Of course he would have gone whatever had been the penalty. The penalty was that Mr Crediton gave Kate what she called "a dreadful scold." "It was like a fishwoman, you know," she confided to John afterwards. "I could not have believed it of papa; but I suppose when people are in a passion they are all alike, and don't mind what they say."

"It is because he grudges you to me," said poor John, with a sigh, "and I don't much wonder;" upon which Kate clasped her two pretty hands on his arm, and beguiled him out of all his troubles. This was on one of the Sunday evenings which it was his privilege to spend with her. Mr Crediton was old-

fashioned, and saw no company on Sundays, and that was the day on which John was free to come to spend as much of it as he pleased with his betrothed. At first he had begun by going to luncheon, and remaining the whole afternoon in her company; but very soon it came to be the evening only which was given up to him. Either it was that Mr Crediton made himself disagreeable at luncheon, or that he thrust engagements upon Kate, reminding her that she had promised to read to him, or copy letters for him, or some altogether unimportant matter. Mr Crediton, though he was so much the best off of the party that he had thus the means of avenging himself, was not without grievances too; indeed, had he been consulted, he would probably have declared himself the person most aggrieved. His only child was about to be taken from him, and her society was already claimed by this nameless young man, without any particular recommendation, whom in her caprice she preferred. The Sunday afternoons had been the banker's favourite moment; he had nothing to do, and his doors were shut against society, and his

child was always with him. No wonder that he used all the means in his power to drive back the enemy from that sacred spot.

And Mr Crediton had means in his power, —unlike Mrs Mitford, who sat, more alone than he, by her bedroom window all the hours when she was not at church, and wiped noiselessly again and again the tears out of her eyes. John's mother suffered more from this dreary change than words could say. She had not the heart to sit down-stairs except when it was necessary for that outline of family life consisting of prayers and meals, which, to Dr Mitford's mind, filled up all possible requirements. Mrs Mitford did not tell her husband what she was thinking. There seemed no longer any one left in the world who cared to know. And she could not punish Kate as Mr Crediton could punish John. Probably she would not have done it if she could, for to punish Kate would have been to punish him too; but oh, she sometimes thought to herself, if her horse had only run away with her before somebody else's door, this might never have been!

Thus it will be seen that this pretty young lady and that first caprice for the subjugation of John which came into her mind before she had seen him, in the leisure of her convalescence, had affected the friends of both in anything but a happy way. Indeed nobody except perhaps Kate herself got any good out of the new bond. To her, who at the present moment was not called upon to make any sacrifice or give up anything, the possession of John, as of some one to fall back upon, was pleasant enough. She had all her usual delights and pleasures, lived as she had always lived, amused herself as of old, was the envy of her companions, the ringleader in all their amusements, the banker's only, much-indulged, fortunate child; and at the same time she had John to worship her on those Sunday evenings which once had been rather dull for Kate. When Mr Crediton dozed, as he sometimes did after dinner, or when he was busy with the little private pieces of business he used to give himself up to on Sunday evenings, there was her lover ready to bow down before her. It was the cream and crown of all her many enjoy-

ments. Everybody admired, petted, praised, and was good to Kate—and John adored her. She looked forward to her Sunday ramble round the old-fashioned garden, sometimes in the dark, sometimes in the moonlight, with an exquisite sense of something awaiting her there which had a more subtle, penetrating, delicious sweetness than all the other sweets surrounding her. And she felt that he was happy too as soon as she had placed her little hand on his arm—and forgot that there was anything in his lot which could make him feel that he had bought his happiness dearly. Kate was young, and knew nothing about life, and therefore was unconsciously selfish. She was happy, without any drawback to her happiness; and so, naturally and as a matter of course, she took him to be, forgetting that he had purchased that hour on the Sunday evenings by the sacrifice of all the prejudices and all the habits and prospects and occupations of his life. This unconsciousness was one from which she might awaken any day. A chance word might open her eyes to it, and show her, to her own disgust and confusion, the immense

price he was paying for so transitory a delight; but at present nothing had awakened such a thought in her mind, and she was the one happy among the five most intimately concerned.

Next after Kate in contentment with the new state of affairs was Dr Mitford, who saw a prospect of a very satisfactory "settlement in life" for his son, though he did not feel any very great satisfaction in the preliminaries. It was a pain to him, though a mild one, that John had abandoned the Church and become a clerk in a banker's office. It was a pain, and a little humiliation too, for everybody in Fanshawe Regis, and even the neighbouring clergymen, shook their heads and were very sorry to hear it, and wounded Dr Mitford's pride. But, after all, that was a trifling drawback in comparison with the substantial advantage of marrying so much money as was represented by Kate Crediton. "And fond of her too," he would say to himself in his study when he paused in one of his articles and thought it over. But yet the articles were interrupted by thinking it over as they had

never been used to be. It gave him a passing twinge now and then, but it was he who suffered the least after Kate.

As for Mr Crediton, there was a certain sullen wrath in his mind which he seldom suffered to have expression, yet which plagued him like a hidden wound. To think that for this lout, this country lad, his child should, as it were, have jilted him, made light of all his wishes, shown a desire to separate herself from him and the life which he had fenced round from every care, and made delightful with every indulgence that heart could desire! He had gone out of his way to contrive pleasures for her, and to surround her with everything that was brilliant and fair like herself. She was more like a princess than a banker's daughter, thanks to his unchanging, unremitting thoughtfulness; and this was how she had rewarded him the very first opportunity she had. Mr Crediton was very sore and wroth, as fathers are sometimes. Mothers are miserable and lonely and jealous often enough, heaven knows! but the fathers are wroth with that inextinguishable wonder—how the love-

making of some trumpery young man should, in a day or two, or a week or two, obliterate their deeper love and all the bonds of nature—which lies as deep in the heart as does the young impulse which calls it forth. Mr Crediton was angry, not so much, except at moments, with Kate, as with the world, and nature, and things in general—and John. He could not cross or thwart his child, but he would have been glad in his heart if something had happened to the man whom his child loved. Such sentiments are wicked, and they are very inconsistent—but they exist everywhere, and it would be futile to deny them; and the consequence was, that Mr Crediton was much less happy after his daughter's engagement, and put up with it by an effort; and, while John had his moment of delight on those Sunday evenings, was, for his part, anything but delighted. It even made him less good a man. He sat and fretted by himself, and found it very difficult to occupy his mind with any other subject. It vexed him to think of his Kate thus hanging on a stranger's arm. Of course he had always known that she must

marry some time, but he had thought little of it as an approaching calamity; and then it had appeared certain that there would be a blaze of external advantage, and perhaps splendour, in any match Kate could make, which perhaps, prospectively at least, would lessen the blow. If it had exalted her into the higher circles of the social paradise, he felt as if the deprivation to himself would have been less great. But here there was nothing to make amends—no salve to his wounded tenderness. Poor John! Mr Crediton had the justice now and then to feel that John was paying a hard price for his felicity. “Serve the fellow right,” he said, and almost hated him; and pondered, with a *sour* sense of cruelty and wrong-doing, how he might be got rid of and removed out of the way.

Mrs Mitford, for her part, was simply unhappy, without hoping to mend matters, or thinking any more than she could help about the cause. She had lost her boy. To be sure it is what most mothers have to look forward to; but she, up to the very last, had been flatter-
tering herself that she should not be as most

mothers. It had seemed so clear that his lot was cast at home, where surely his duty was ; and the change had this double aggravation to her, that she had expected him not only to make her personally happy, but to carry on and develop the work of her life. It was she who had been for all these years the real spiritual head of Fanshawe Regis. Dr Mitford had done the "duty," and had preached the sermons, but every practical good influence, every attempt to mend the rustic parish, to curb its characteristic vices, or develop its better qualities, had come from his wife. And she had laboured on for years past, with the conviction that her son would perfect everything she began ; that he would bring greater knowledge to it, and a more perfectly trained mind, and all the superior understanding which such humble women hold to be natural to a man. When she had to give up this hope, it seemed to her at first as though the world had come to an end. What was the use of doing anything more, of carrying on the plans which must now die with her ? The next new curate would probably care nothing

about her schemes, and even might set himself to thwart her, as new curates sometimes do when a clergywoman is too active in a parish. And she was sick of the world and everything in it. The monotony of her life, from which all the colour seemed to have died out in a moment, suddenly became apparent to her, and all the failures, and obstructions, and hindrances which met her at every side. What could she do, a weak woman, she said to herself, against all the powers of darkness, as embodied in Fanshawe Regis? Would it not be best to resign the unprofitable warfare and sink back into quiet, and shut out the mocking light?

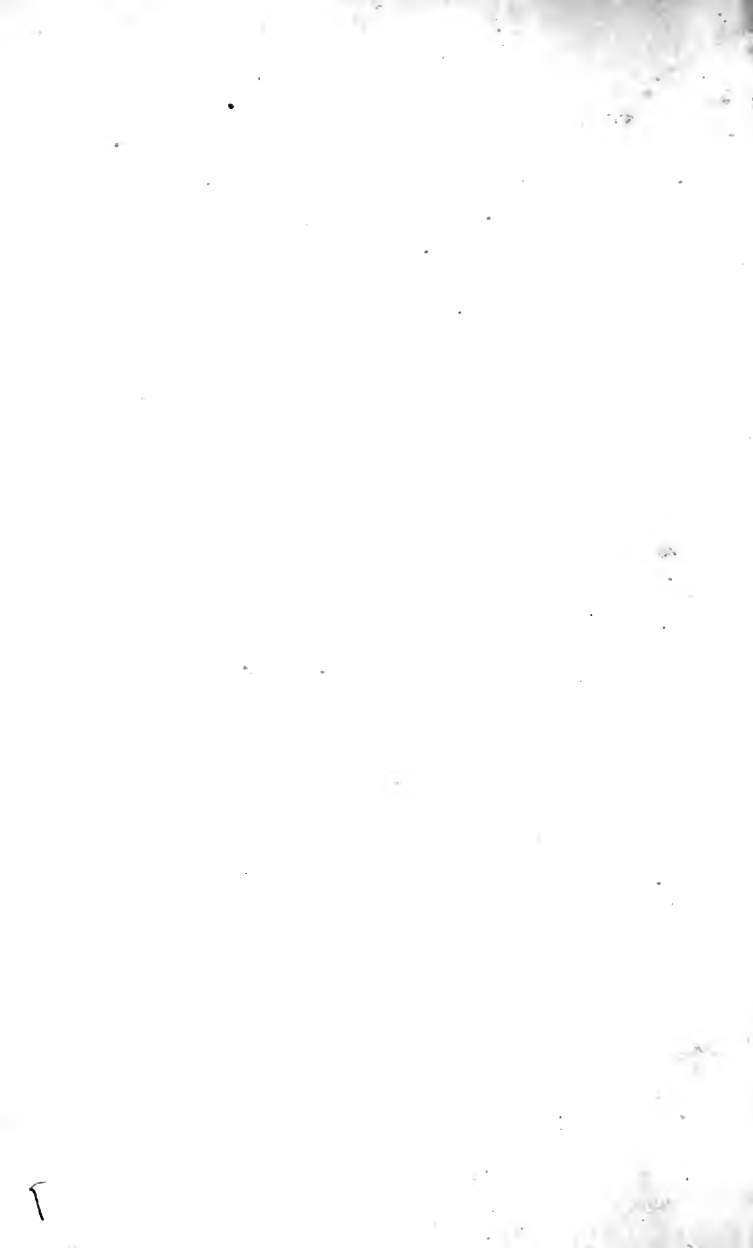
Poor Mrs Mitford! wherever she went the people asked her questions about Mr John. Was he not to be a clergyman after all? Was it along o' his lass that wouldn't let him do as he wished? What was it? His mother came home with her heart wearied by such inquiries, and sick with disappointment and misery. And she would go up to the room in which he was born, and cry, and say to herself that she

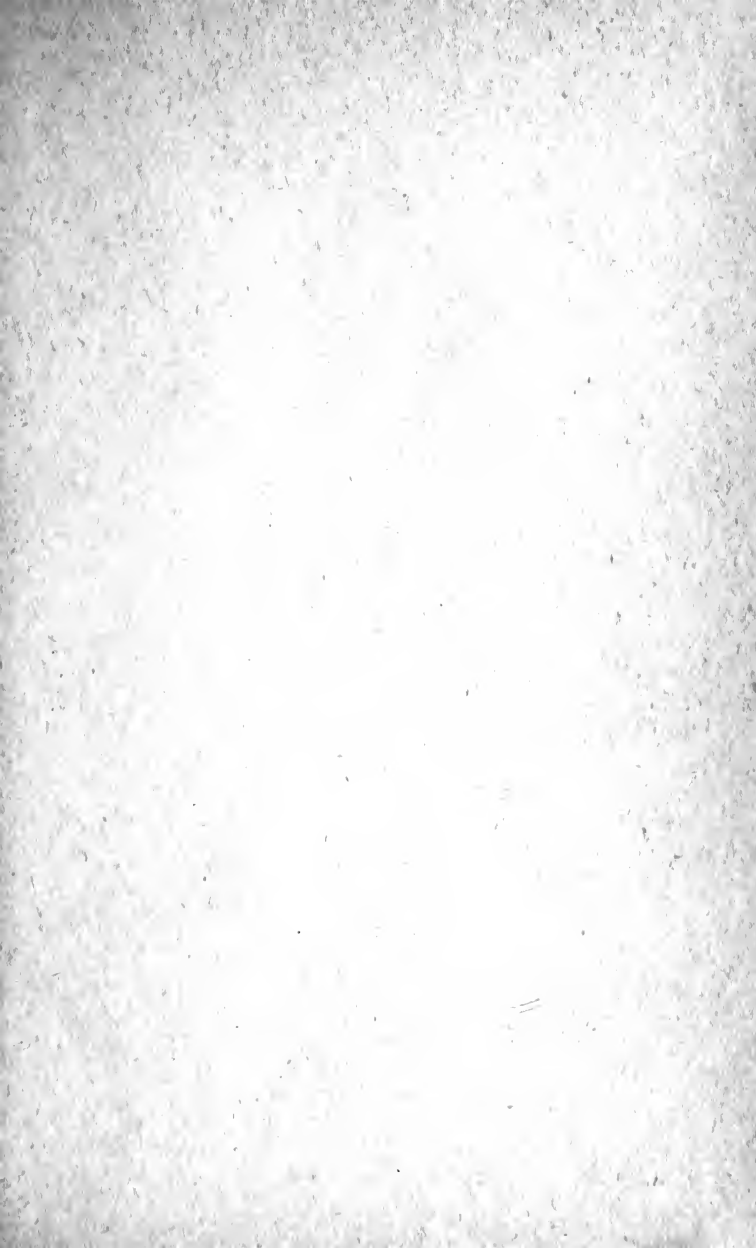
never never could encounter it again. And oh, how dreary it was sitting down-stairs for the few moments which necessity and Dr Mitford required, in those summer nights when the moths were flying by scores in at the open window, and dimness reigned in all the corners, and the lamp shone steady and clear on the table ! In all the obscurity round her, her son was not lurking. He was not ready to step in by the open window as he had done so often. He was with Kate Crediton, giving up his whole heart and soul to her ; and his father and mother rang for the servants, and had prayers, as though they had never had any children. What a change, what a change it was ! Mrs Mitford knew that it was impossible to thwart providence, let its plans be ever so unsatisfactory ; but oh, she said to herself, why did not Kate's accident happen close to the Huntleys, or to any house but hers ? Other boys were not so romantic, not so tender-hearted ; and other mothers had heaps of children, and could not brood over the fortunes of every individual among them, as Mrs Mit-

ford, with an ache of helpless anger at herself, knew that she brooded over John's. But all was in vain. She could not mend matters now. She could not mend her own bleeding, aching heart. And after all, the only thing possible was to go back to her work, whatever might come of it, and do her best. She could bear anything, she thought, but those Sunday nights — moments which had once been so sweet, and were now so solitary. She said not a word to any one, and tried hard to keep herself from thinking; and she wrote kind, cheerful little letters to her boy, who, for his part, was so very good in writing regularly — so unlike most young men, as she told the people. But after she had finished those cheery, pleasant, gossiping letters, with all the news of the parish in them, Mrs Mitford would sit down and have a good cry. Oh what a change there was! how silent the house was, how ghostly the garden where she was always thinking she heard his step! The servants came in and went out again, and the father and the mother would sit together softly with-

out a word, as if they had no child. Thus it will be seen that, of all concerned, it was Mrs Mitford who suffered most; but that none was satisfied, or felt the slightest approach of anything like happiness in the new state of affairs, unless, indeed, it might be Kate.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

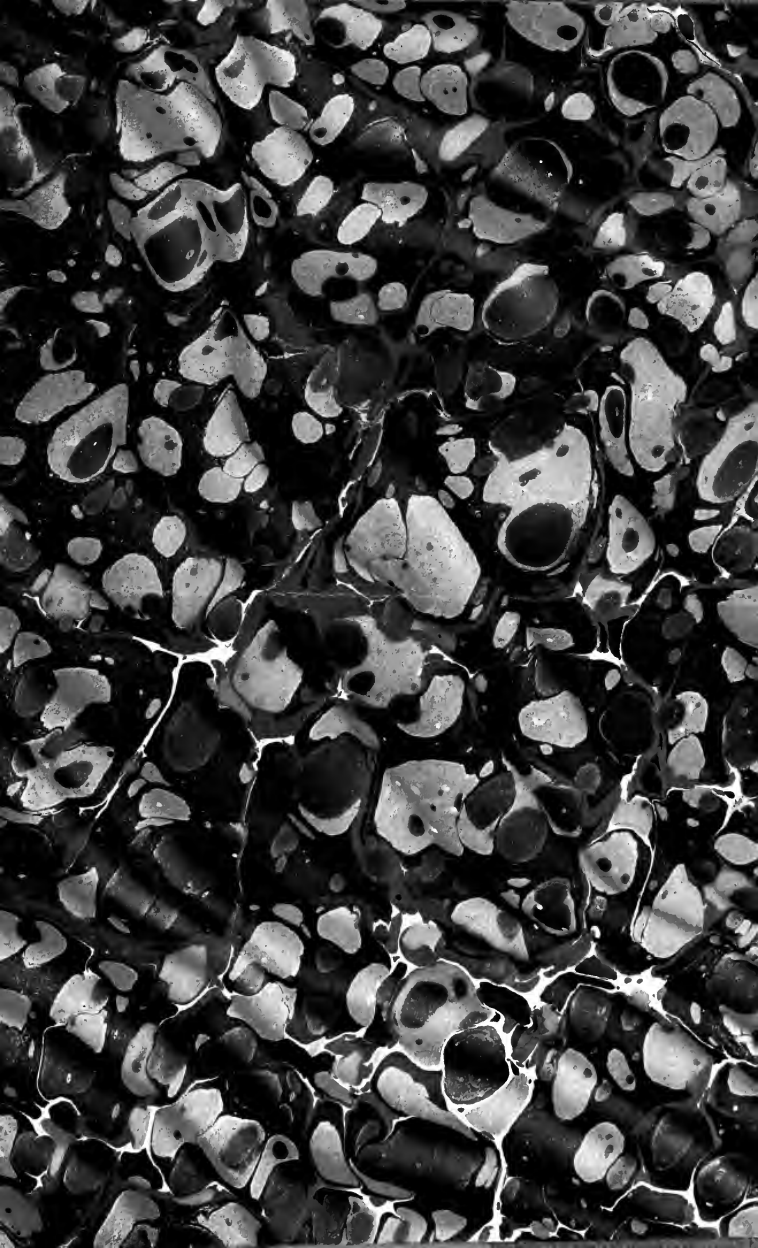












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